SUZANNA LYNN
HOOK'S
LITTLE MERMAID

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About the Author
Also By Suzanna Lynn

Hook’s Little Mermaid
Book One in The Untold Stories
By Suzanna Lynn

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Hook’s Little Mermaid – The Untold Stories

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Edited by Hollie the Editor
Formatting by Sonya Loveday
Illustration and cover art by Suzanna Smith of Funky Book Designs
Interior chapter headings and scene dividers by Funky Book Designs

The Untold Stories

HOOK'S LITTLE MERMAID

BY

SUZANNA LYNN

DEDICATION

For all the boys who wanted to grow up to be pirates and all the girls who dreamed of being mermaids. This story is for you.

I WAS NOT ALWAYS THE MEAN, DEPRAVED CREATURE HISTORY HAS PAINTED me to be. It may surprise you to find that deep down, I am not villainous at all. Most people know me as Captain James Hook. However, that is not my name.

My true name is Jameson Shaw. I grew up breaking my back aboard fishing ships, learning the ways of the sea and working my way up from a mere cabin boy all the way up to captain of my very own fishing rig. I had dreams of bigger and better things; however, I was quick to discover there was not much money to be had in the fishing business. Such hard work with so little return. Honestly, it's a wonder not all fishermen turn pirate.

Having had enough of being broke, without a spare doubloon to my name, I threw out my fishing net and began flying a pirate flag aboard my

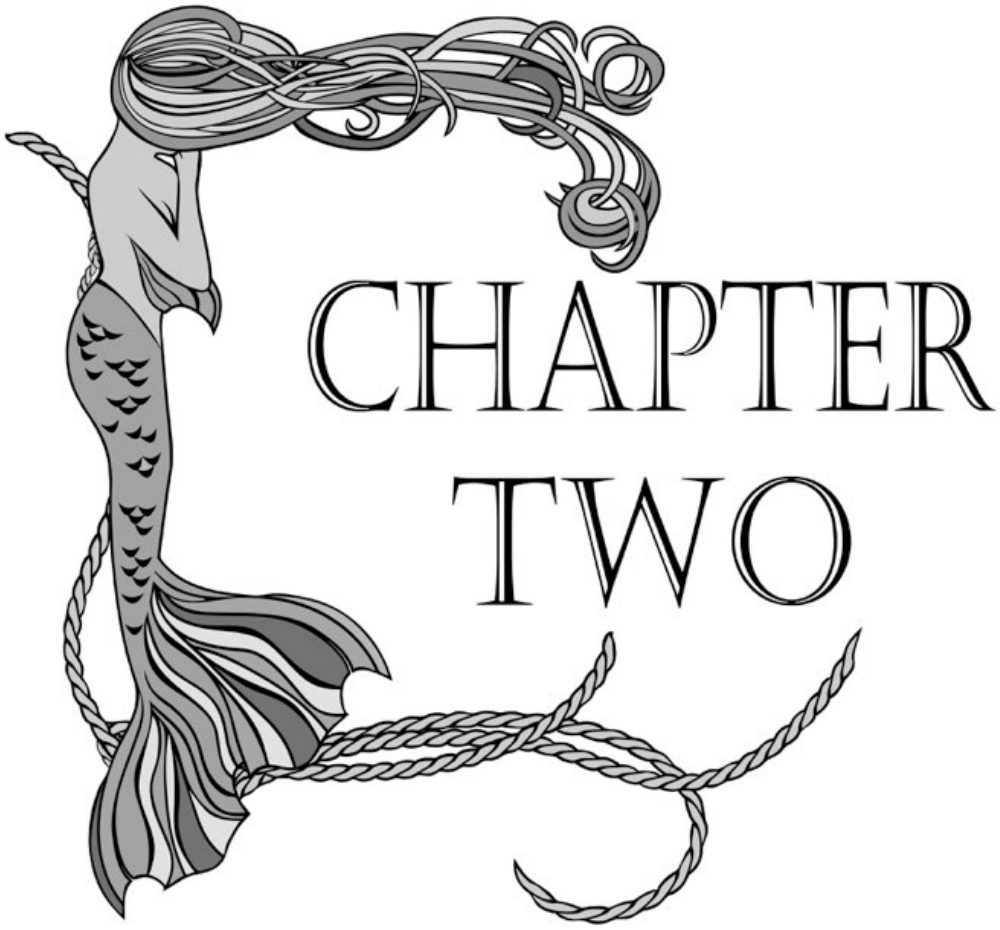
galleon, the *Jolly Roger*.

I started out an honest pirate. Well, honest enough. I had a code and I made my crew stick by it or walk the plank. We never robbed or hurt women or children. We avoided bloodshed at all costs. I even made sure we gave a little coin to the less fortunate from time to time. You could say I was the Robin Hood of the high seas. Well, all right, maybe that *is* a tad exaggerated. But I did my best to keep my nose clean.

I had plenty of gold, the finest ship a pirate could ask for, and my crew respected me. I had it all!

Until the day a little mermaid came into my life and changed everything.

Let me tell you my untold story.



IT WAS STILL EARLY WHEN I BROUGHT THE *JOLLY ROGER* INTO PORT AT Fayhorn. The sun had not yet begun to kiss the horizon. I have found it was always best to make port while the blanket of night was over you. It made it easier to blend in with other galleons.

"Strike colors and lower the gangplank," I called once my beloved ship was secured to the dock.

"Aye, aye, Captain," called Mr. Bones. He was a devoted member of the crew, even if he was a bit slow. Too many hits to the head with a boom will do that to a man.

"Not to question you, Captain," said the portly Mr. Smee, walking up the stairs to stand beside me at the helm. "But why do you want to go slogging through unknown territory to get yourself a fairy?"

Mr. Smee had no imagination. “Because, my dear fellow, I don’t have one,” I explained. “And you never know when a bit of fairy dust might come in handy.” Of course, there was much more to it than that, but there was no point trying to explain it to him. Not yet.

“Fairy dust?” Mr. Smee murmured, pulling off his knit cap and scratching his bald head.

I ignored his query and addressed the crew. “All right, you bilge rats, remember, we’re not here to pillage. Any man found doing so will be given no quarter.” If truth be told, I rarely had to follow through with such a threat, however my men knew it was a real possibility. I commanded respect and required obedience; a captain had to be able to act on a threat or he wouldn’t be a captain much longer.

“Aye, aye,” the men called out in unison as I made my way off the galleon. “Mr. Smee, I leave you in charge to get the men in order.”

I walked the short distance to the pier master’s humble dwelling in order to make arrangements for my docking fee. Even when we did plan on pillaging, I paid my fees, otherwise it eliminated the much-needed element of surprise.

The windows were dark, but I pounded on the door and waited. Soon, the soft glow of candlelight shifted past the window as someone inside made his way to the door. The old wood creaked as a man in a long nightshirt slowly opened the door. “Yes?” he asked.

“Apologies,” I said with a slight tilt of my head. “I need to make arrangements for my ship at port.”

“You’ve sailed in awfully early,” the grey-haired man mumbled as he pulled out his brown leather logbook.

“Sorry for waking you,” I replied. “The wind was on our side.”

“What brings you to Fayhorn?” the old man asked, thumbing the book open to a page marked with a black feather.

Such a usual question, but seriously so ridiculous. They used it as a way of drawing out criminals, pirates like myself. But honestly, did they think we pirates were going to say, “We’re just here to rape and pillage. You know, the usual,” or anything along those lines?

“Just a bit of recreation for my crew. They’ve been working so hard, after all,” I responded.

“Well, that’s nice of you,” the old man said, dipping a quill in a bottle of ink. “Is that your ship just down the way there?” He pointed.

“Yes, the one with the mermaid on the bow,” I confirmed.

“Well, it’s a shilling a day Mr. …” The man waited for me to give him my name.

“Williams. Captain James Williams, if you please,” I said, giving a nod and a smile.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Captain Williams,” he said, scrawling the name into his book. “Like I said, it’s a shilling a day.”

I handed him four shillings and a wink. “Just in case we get a bit too liberal with the rum and need a few days to sleep it off.”

“Very good, Captain Williams,” the man offered, placing the coins in a leather bag.

The old man quickly showed me to the door, most likely hoping to grab a few more minutes of sleep before the sun brought Fayhorn to life.

I met Mr. Smee and the men outside the Scarlett Lion, the local inn located next door to the tavern. With it being so early, the tavern was nearly deserted, though several patrons lay passed out front against the grey brick walls.

I could see the men eyeing the tavern in hopes of a pint.

“Sorry, boys, no rum today. I need your heads clear. Once our mission is done, we can celebrate with a round on me.” I handed Smee a pouch of gold. “For now, check in at the Scarlett Lion and get a few hours’ sleep. We have a long day ahead of us.”

“What about you, Captain?” Smee asked.

“I’ll be along in a bit,” I said. “Just need to stretch my legs, look around to plan better for our journey. You go on and get a few winks.”

Once the men retired, I made my way to Jackson “Black Eyes” Wither’s home. He was an old scallywag, long retired from his pirating days, having made a good living traveling the high seas. Now he was the law in these parts, if you could have law in such an accursed dredge hole as Fayhorn.

I found the hovel in the center of town. Compared to the other shacks in the area, his house would qualify as refined and elegant. That wasn’t saying much. At best, it was spacious, but most likely drafty.

As I approached, I saw a candle flickering in the window. He was expecting me, so I pounded on the recently whitewashed door.

The door swung open. “Jameson!” he shouted, too loudly for my taste. “How the devil are you?” He clapped me hard on the shoulder. “Come in, come in, my boy.”

I walked in the musty home; the planked floor creaked like the deck of a ship.

“Old Black Eyes, I see you haven’t lost your taste,” I said as I admired a bronzed nude mermaid statue nearly as tall as myself.

“True right.” The man laughed. “I still like to keep some of my plunder around. Makes this old pirate feel young.” He took the stopper from a blue decanter and poured amber liquid into two cups. “Rum?”

“Aye.” I accepted, though I didn’t plan on taking more than a sip. I had a weakness for the drink, and it would certainly put a delay in my plans if I drank too much. But it would be rude to outright refuse.

Jackson handed me a tumbler of the spiced liquid. “So, you mean to go through with it then?”

“Why else would I have come?” I asked, picking up a chair and sitting astride it. “I’m not one for social calls.”

“Risky business,” he said. “Fairies aren’t to be trusted.”

“I don’t need to trust them,” I said, taking a swig of rum. I relished the comforting burn as the golden liquid slid down my throat. “I just need the dust. I believe any fairy would happily exchange some dust for its freedom.”

“Aye, you’d think,” he said, tossing back his glass with a gulp. “But fairies aren’t like normal folk. Plus, you will need a lot of dust if you plan on making that ship of yours flight worthy.”

Flight. Not a word one would normally use in the same sentence as ship, but that was exactly what I planned to do. I needed to make my ship fly.

“Well, I will just have to find a fairy who finds me incredibly charming,” I said, absentmindedly taking another swig of rum.

Jackson laughed, choking on his drink. “Aye. That you will!”

I set my half-full glass down on a nearby table. “Do you have the map?”

“Aye.” Jackson sighed. He walked to a bookshelf at the far end of the dim, drafty room and picked up a small, tattered wood-and-leather chest.

He carried it over and set it next to me on the table, pulling out several pieces of old parchment. “Here is the map to get you safely through the fairy wood. Now, I say safely, but that really depends entirely on you being able to get your men through without falling into a fairy trap. This is merely the path, not a guarantee you’ll return.”

“Understood,” I said, taking the parchment map.

He handed me another rolled-up parchment much smaller than the first, along with a leather pouch. “And here’s what you’ll need to actually catch the wee fairy once you’re there.”

I unrolled the parchment, scanning the list of supplies and instructions. Pretty straightforward. A lantern, candles, a bit of honey and a trinket. “A trinket?” I mumbled under my breath.

“Aye,” Jackson said. “That’s the most important part.” He nodded toward the small leather pouch.

I unlaced the tie strings and slid a pocket watch into my hand. The face was broken, the gold rubbed through to the bronze underneath. “What the devil is this? It’s broken.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said with a smile. “A fairy can’t help but be attracted to gears and a bit of gold.”

My resolve on the mission was faltering, but I was determined to see the task through. “Thanks, old man. I owe you one.”

“One?” He laughed. “There are few who know the secrets of the fairy wood and live to tell the tale.”

“Fine,” I said, tossing down a pouch of gold. “The next ten bottles of rum are on me.”

Jackson smiled. His two front teeth had been capped in gold and they glinted in the light. “That’s more like it.”

I stood, taking the two parchments and the leather pouch and placing them in the left breast pocket hidden in the lining of my coat.

“Jameson,” Jackson said, a question in his voice, “you never told me why this was so important. Why are you hell-bent on making the *Jolly Roger* fly?”

I took the tumbler of rum from the table. Against my better judgment, I threw it back, downing the remaining contents. “Because Peter Pan killed my son, and now I’m going to kill him.”

THE SUN WAS HIGH IN THE CRYSTAL-BLUE SKY AS MY MEN AND I VENTURED into the fairy wood. Once the cover of trees came over us, we couldn't tell day from night.

We traveled for several hours in utter silence into the darkness, with nothing but our torches, a compass, and a map to tell us we were headed in the right direction. If I timed it right, we would arrive in the heart of the forest just before sunset. Just enough time to set the trap, hide and wait.

"Captain?" a trembling voice whispered through the dark.

"What is it, Smee?" I grumbled, turning my torch toward him.

"How do we know we have gone far enough into the fairy wood?" he asked. "Why must we venture so far in?"

“This map shows us where we need to go,” I said, holding up the parchment. “We must get to the heart of the forest if we hope to capture a fairy.”

“And we capture one with a lantern?” Smee asked, cutting an overgrown bush with his sword.

“Among other things,” I murmured as we came upon a stream. I looked at the map. Right on track. I turned to face the line of men. “Not much farther, boys. Be on your guard. We’ve entered fairy territory.”

We clomped through the rippling waters of the stream. Our heavy steps caused loud splashes as we trudged on.

After cutting our way through a dense area of brambles, we came upon a clearing in a valley. The tree canopy parted and dimming sunlight streamed through the branches. A soft breeze blew, catching the leaves and creating shadows that danced on the grass-covered ground.

“This is it,” I said, looking to my map one more time for reassurance.

“Captain?” Mr. Smee asked.

“Spread word through the lines that we’ve arrived,” I instructed. “Get Harlow and Blackburn to make a perimeter around the area while I head to the center and set the trap.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Smee said, turning on his heel.

“And Smee?” I added, grabbing his arm. “Make sure the men know the seriousness of this venture. Fairies can be deadly when cornered. This must go off without a hitch.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, heading through the line of men with my orders.

I pulled my leather satchel of supplies tight to my shoulder and descended into the clearing.

I made quick work of setting up the trap. I dug a small hole in the dirt, big enough to hold the base of the lantern. Taking the jar of honey, I poured more than half into the hole. I pulled out the ironwork lantern. It was a beautiful piece. Instead of glass windows, it featured intricate

filigree work in a tight lattice that covered it entirely. I placed the lantern in the hole over the honey. “That should be enough to hold it steady,” I mumbled to myself.

I pushed the button on the pocket watch, exposing the broken face. Dropping a small dollop of honey on the back of the watch, I placed it inside the lantern.

Delicately, I rigged the door of the lantern with a twig, some fishing line and an old spring so it would stay open easily but would snap shut with a quick tug of the line.

Lastly, I set the beeswax candles, in no particular pattern, to light the area with their soft glow. Fairies were intelligent creatures; however, they lacked common sense and had a great deal of curiosity that tended to get them in trouble.

By the time I finished laying the trap, Mr. Smee was walking toward me. I turned and quickened my pace to meet him, unspooling the fishing line as I walked. “We’re ready, Mr. Smee.”

Smee followed me to the edge of the clearing. “Captain, I understand how this could lure a fairy, but how exactly do you plan to keep her in the lantern? Can’t she just use her magic to free herself?”

“Your sexist attitude is appalling, Mr. Smee,” I teased. “Not all fairies are female. Do we need to have a talk about how baby fairies are made?”

Mr. Smee blushed crimson. “I… I didn’t mean… Of course I know how…” He took off his cap and used it to wipe the sweat from his face.

I couldn’t help but laugh at his flustered behavior. “Relax, man, I’m having a bit of fun.”

He relaxed and sighed.

“And as for the lantern,” I continued, “I’m surprised you didn’t know that iron burns fairies.”

“Oh! Indeed?” Smee answered, following my lead as we hunkered down behind a row of bushes on the edge of the clearing.

“The men are all in position?” I asked, making sure I had a good view of the lantern.

“Yes, sir,” Smee said. “They await your command.”

“They are to sit and wait,” I instructed. “With any luck, we’ll capture ourselves a fairy without losing anyone.”

I could hear Smee swallow hard as we watched the sun slowly burn away into darkness.

THE SUN HAD BEEN DOWN for nearly an hour when I saw distant glints moving through the trees. Fairies were like tiny shooting stars, leaving a soft trail of light in their wake.

Several little sparkles of light swiftly skittered past the area; none lingering even a moment as the candle flames softly swayed in the light breeze.

I began to lose hope. *Perhaps Jackson was pulling my leg,* I thought. *What if his plan all along was to send my crew and me out here to perish, leaving him free to take all our loot while the* Jolly Roger *sits unguarded with but a skeleton crew in port?* I pushed the negative thoughts away as best I could and continued to watch the little lantern in the clearing.

After another half hour, and several near fairy encounters, a little beacon of light whizzed through the clearing. It circled the area several times slowly before stopping to land a good ten feet from the lantern.

My heart caught in my throat as I gripped the end of the fishing line. From the distance, I couldn’t tell if it was a flower fairy or elemental, or even if it was a female or male. I didn’t care. The little fairy light floated back into the air and stopped two feet from the lantern. *This is it,* I

thought. *Just a few more minutes and I will have a fairy. I will have the beginnings of catching Pan.*

I felt Mr. Smee stir next to me. I placed a finger over my pursed lips in warning.

The little fairy hopped up again, landing a few inches from the lantern. It took flight again, doing several circles in the area above the lantern and candles. It went higher, circling the clearing once more before landing next to the opened lantern door.

The fairy light twinkled brighter, most likely due to its nervousness. I held the fishing line tightly, my palms sweaty as I waited. Finally, as though giving in to the overwhelming urge of curiosity, the little fairy walked through the open door of the lantern.

I didn't miss a beat. I pulled the fishing line hard enough to pull the propped-up twig from the spring-latched door. It snapped shut with a click that echoed through the clearing.

I jumped to my feet, taking off at a run for the lantern. The men followed suit; the sound of feet thumped as they all ran for the center of the clearing.

I reached the lantern, snatching it up, strings of honey trailing behind. "Got ya!" I peered through the latticework windows. Inside, a tiny fairy woman shivered in fear. She had a great tangle of white hair stuck out in several places. Her minuscule dress was made up of yellow and orange leaves wrapped around her.

"Release me!" she screamed, her voice high pitched and tinkling.

"In due time, dear one," I said, pulling some rags from my satchel. "Once you give me what I want, you'll be free to go."

"Never!" she screamed. "I will never help the likes of you." She gripped the door of the lantern, pulling away with a yelp as the metal burned her small hands.

“Come now,” I soothed. “Who knows, you might find a friendship with me to be mutually beneficial.”

She glowered at me through the small openings in the filigree ironwork.

“Hold tight, my little fairy,” I said, wrapping the rags around the lantern, muffling her shriek, and shoving it in my satchel. The rags were a necessary evil, as her cries could be overheard by other fairies in the area.

“Get the men together,” I said, turning to Mr. Smee. “We return to the ship tonight. I cannot risk being found with a fairy in my possession. She’s the kind of prize most men would kill for.”

IT WAS early morning when we arrived in the village. The men begged to stop for a pint, but I did them one better and bought enough barrels to last them until our next port call. I wanted to see that beautiful horizon and have Fayhorn and the fairy wood at my back before anyone was the wiser.

“Weigh anchor!” I commanded. “Hoist the mainsail!” The wind had begun to pick up as we made our way back from the forest. It was surely a sign from the Fates that this venture was meant to be.

I clutched the satchel tighter to my side as a gust of wind billowed the sails. “Mr. Smee, you have the helm. I’ll be in my quarters.”

Once I retired to my chambers and felt the comforting pull of waves pressing the bow, I took a deep breath and relaxed.

I pulled a long draw straight from a bottle of rum, allowing the liquid to warm me from the inside out. Carrying the bottle and satchel, I sat down at my desk, shoving maps and letters out of my way.

Opening the satchel, I pulled the rag-covered lantern out onto the table. As I unwrapped the rags, the little fairy inside began to scream out in her

shrill voice.

“How dare you! How dare you ever take a fairy,” she squealed. “You will be caught!”

“I doubt as much,” I said with a smoldering smile. “I figure if you were so important, you wouldn’t have been alone. Chances are, you’re just one of many who will not be missed.”

It was cold, but it took talent to wound while healing someone’s pride in order to get what you wanted from them.

“However, you’re very important to me,” I said. She peered up at me through the iron bars. “I take care of those who take care of me.”

She huffed, crossing her arms as she sat on top of the broken pocket watch inside. “If you think I’m going to let you use me to pillage and steal from others, you’re much mistaken.” She turned her back to me.

“I have no such request,” I said. “I merely ask you to help me balance the scales on the one who has wronged me.”

“Revenge,” she sounded. “You would use me for revenge? What? Someone cheat you in a game of cards?”

“Hardly.” I went quiet. Staring at her through her iron prison bars, I took a long draw of rum. “I want your help getting revenge on the one who took my son from me.”

She slowly turned, looking skeptical over her shoulder at me. “You have a son?”

“Had,” I said, fighting the memories bubbling to the surface. “He was kidnapped and then killed.”

She covered her mouth with her small hand, stifling a gasp. “Oh dear! I’m so sorry!”

Her genuine reaction gave me a pang of guilt at kidnapping her. Was I any better than Pan had been? I took her from her home against her will and demanded she help me, just like Pan. I took another swig of rum, trying to swallow the guilt.

“And you want me to kill this man?” she asked. “I can’t. I can’t do it, no matter how justified the reason. Fairy magic doesn’t work that way.”

“No,” I said, leaning closer to her. “That honor lies with me. I merely need some fairy dust to make my ship fly.”

“You want your ship to fly?” She laughed.

“Why is that funny?” I asked, feeling a bit embarrassed by the fairy’s tinkering laughter. “I’m serious. I know you can do it!”

“Yes, I can do it,” she said, attempting to regain her composure. “But why would I? That is a great deal of magic.”

“I understand what I’m asking of you,” I said. “But it’s the only way. He flies, you see.”

“Is he a fairy too?” she asked, going stiff, alarm in her wide eyes.

“No, merely someone with a steady supply of fairy dust,” I said.

“You mean he has fairies held captive?” she squealed.

I knew it was wrong of me to manipulate the wee pixie, but I also knew it would make things go smoother. “Yes, many.”

The information seemed to sway her feelings about my proposal. “And making your ship fly would help you get this boy how?”

“He finds pleasure in tormenting my men and me. It’s impossible to have a fair fight with him.”

“That’s unsporting,” she said, her wings fluttering behind her.

“Indeed, bad form,” I said, admiring the pixie’s spirit. “And if I’m unable to get him, I wouldn’t be able to help you free the fairies he holds hostage.”

I could see her mind working as I spoke.

“Will you help me avenge my son?” I asked. “Will you give me the fairy dust to make my ship fly and not try to escape until the job is finished?”

She sat, pondering her options. It was known a fairy promise was binding. She couldn’t feign interest to escape. Her word had to be kept.

“And we free the fairies?” she asked.

“Of course,” I assured. “Once my ship flies and I have Pan, I will get the information on the fairies’ whereabouts for you.”

She sighed, still trying to decide.

“Well, Miss Fairy?” I asked. “Do we have an accord?”

She stood on the pocket watch. “We do, sir.”

I opened the lantern, allowing her to flutter out onto the table before me. “And my name’s not Miss Fairy. We have names, you know!”

“Apologies, my wee lass,” I chuckled. “What would you have me call you?”

“Tinker Bell,” she said, hands on her hips. “My name is Tinker Bell.”

"We're coming in at Ravenmore, Captain," Mr. Smee said from the doorway of my quarters.

"Very good. Bring her in to port and give the men a day to gather rations," I said.

"Aye, aye, Captain," Smee answered, closing the door.

After two full days of sailing west from Fayhorn, we were finally in the realm of Timbergard. Timbergard was due north of Neverland, and the village of Ravenmore was a common port for travelers.

"Why are we stopping?" Tinker Bell chimed from her spot on the desk. She had been entertaining herself by reading over books.

"I want to make sure we have plenty of supplies," I replied, standing from my chair and stretching. "I don't know how long we will be in

Neverland, and it might not be safe to make port while we're there."

"Where exactly is Ravenmore?" asked Tinker Bell, zipping across the room to look out my window.

"It's the main port of Timbergard. Well, really it's the only port. Timbergard is what some would call old country," I explained. "It was once part of the Kingdom of Bruen. Bruen was known for its lush forests and peaceful villages; many considered it to be one of the most beautiful kingdoms in the world. However, roughly fifteen years ago, a darkness fell over the land. The forest of Blakx became overrun with packs of bloodthirsty wolves."

"Wolves!" Tinker Bell turned to face me.

"Aye, and they weren't your everyday forest beast either," I continued. "It's been said that these wolves had been put under a strong spell. They were large, as big as horses."

"That sounds like dark magic." Tinker Bell gave a shiver. "What happened?"

I shrugged. "Bruen cut off the forest and the village of Ravenmore from the rest of the kingdom. Now, one must take a ship around or brave Blakx forest to get through."

Tinker Bell fluttered over, sitting on my shoulder as I walked over, shutting the window.

"Then why are we stopping here?" she asked, a tremble in her voice. "Is there not a better option? Surely you could have gotten your supplies in Fayhorn."

Curious little bug, I thought, irritated. "No, Ravenmore has what we need. Besides, it's a far quicker route to Neverland from here. Shoving off from Fayhorn would have forced us to go the long way around Dead Man's Reef."

Her eyes grew wide, her mouth dropping open.

I chuckled. “Fear not, wee one. You’re safe as long as you stay on the ship and keep yourself hidden.” I opened a small wood chest I kept on the bookshelf and she flew inside.

It created a very comfortable home for her, at least that is what she told me. I made a little bed using some goose feathers and a handkerchief. She had used various items she found on the ship to make a desk and chair, a little mirror, her own tiny chest to keep her favorite *treasures* in.

“I won’t be gone too long, you’ll be perfectly fine,” I comforted. “I just want to go inland for a few things and stretch my legs. If someone should come in, hide behind the books on the top shelf.”

“I guess,” she said with a sigh as I shut the door.

On the way into the village, I smiled to myself. I was growing rather fond of the pint-size pixie. *Perhaps I’ll pick her up a few things to add to her treasure chest,* I thought.

I trudged through the muddy streets of Ravenmore. The village was always damp, muddy and cold, even if it hadn’t rained in several days. The townsfolk eyed me cautiously. They were accustomed to getting all sorts of travelers through the area, but I figured I stuck out as a pirate.

I decided to stop off at The Hog’s Head, local tavern, for a pint to start my day.

I walked in, sitting down at the bar.

“What’ll it be?” asked the gravelly voiced barkeep.

“Pint,” I mumbled, dropping a silver coin on the bar in front of him.

He picked it up and set a pint of ale in its place. It had been filled to overflowing, the foam sliding down the side. I picked it up and took several long draws from it. My poison of choice would always be rum, but it was nice to switch it up from time to time.

“I swear that’s what she said,” said a raspy voice from down the bar.

I turned my head slightly to see two men in conversation over their drinks.

“She’s daft,” barked the other. “Her father was daft too.”

“I swear I heard it with me own ears. She has taken over his job hunting the wolves. Brought a huge pelt into market just this morning. Saw it with me own eyes, I did.”

“Then we’ll be burying the last of the family line with her. Imagine a young girl hunting wolves when not a man in this village would dare enter those woods.”

I threw back the rest of my drink, slamming down the empty mug. I had no desire to hear the remainder of those two old goats and their grumblings. Besides, I was on a mission. I would need my wits to acquire what I needed.

Walking back out onto the soggy road, I meandered through a few stands selling furs and root vegetables, deciding a chipmunk pelt would be perfect to make Tinker Bell’s bed softer.

“How much?” I asked the crone behind the table. Her weather-beaten face told a story of years of hard labor with little to show for it.

“Chipmunk fur, eh?” She laughed. “A strapping young man like yourself couldn’t possibly have use for such a tiny thing. Here, have a look at this.” She grabbed up a large black pelt. “Just came in this morning. Perfect to keep you warm on those cold winter nights.”

“It’s a beauty, to be sure,” I said, riffling through my coins. “However, I have no need for a bear fur.”

“Bear?” she growled. “This be a wolf pelt! Finest you’ll find in all the land.”

My mouth fell open. The black fur seemed to shimmer in the breeze floating through the village. If a grown man were to throw it over his shoulder, it would still drag the ground behind him.

“I appreciate the offer,” I said, still baffled by the size of the pelt, “but today it will just be the chipmunk. It’s for a friend.”

While I paid for the fur, I noticed a commotion at a neighboring stall. The man, who appeared to sell traps, knives and other hunting equipment, was shouting at a young girl.

She couldn't have been older than fifteen. Her raven hair was tied in a long braid that fell to one side and down the front of her shoulder. She was so striking because, in the muddy, dirty town, her red cape and hood stood out like blood on snow.

"What's with them?" I asked the fur dealer.

"Ah, they be at it all the time," she said. "Girl's got a death wish if you ask me. It be bad enough that she deals with Max of all people. But then she goes out in them woods, hunting gods knows what." The crone shook her head in bewilderment. "But she brings in a good supply of furs."

"Indeed," I mumbled, studying the girl. She was small but sturdy. And though her face reflected youth, there was a ferocity behind her eyes as she squared away with the merchant.

I tried to ignore the disturbance.

I put the little fur in my pocket and proceeded to pass the trapper's stall. I didn't want to get involved in local politics. My goal was to get in and out and on to Neverland. However, when the man reached across his table of goods and grabbed the girl by the wrist, shaking her violently, I had to intercede.

I reached out, grabbing the man's wrist and pressing hard into the tendons under the skin. The pressure caused him to release the girl at once.

"Oy!" the man shouted. "What's this?"

"Didn't your mother ever tell you it's not polite to treat women in such a way?" I asked, stepping to put myself between the girl and the man.

"What business is it of yours?" he barked. "She owes me money and I'm due. It's my right!"

"Your right to get money, it may be," I said. "But you'll not lay another hand on the lass."

“Oh yeah?” growled the man. He stepped around the table separating us. “Who’s gonna stop me? You, little man?”

The man was much larger than me, but his giant stomach put him at a disadvantage of being slow and out of shape. I knew my best bet was to catch him by surprise.

Without a second thought, I brought my arm back and punched him square on the chin. My knuckles made a loud cracking sound as my fist met his flesh. The effect of the blow was instantaneous. The man’s teeth smashed together; his jaw slammed shut. The pressure was more than his body could handle. His eyes rolled back and he fell in a heap on the sludge-covered ground.

“Eh!” shouted a man walking by. “What’d you do to old Max?”

“Max got what he deserved,” the red-cloaked girl shouted.

“Hey, William,” the man shouted to another. “This bloke here picked a fight with Max. Knocked him out cold, he did.”

The man called William began walking toward me, a grimace on his dirty face. *Wonderful*, I thought. *This is exactly what I did not want to happen. Why can’t I stay out of things?*

The unnamed man pulled a knife. “What say we show him who runs this town?”

I drew my sword. “Gentlemen, I highly suggest you reconsider.”

The two men positioned themselves on either side of me.

“So be it,” I mumbled, preparing to defend myself.

Before any of us could take another step, an arrow whizzed by my shoulder, striking the knife right out of the hand of the unnamed man.

“Oy!” he shouted, jumping back.

I turned around. Behind me stood the girl. She held her bow taut with another arrow drawn back.

“Go home, Duncan. You too, William,” she growled. “Max got what he deserved. It was done fair and proper.”

The two men glowered at her but stepped back slowly. Duncan picked up his knife and they took off down the road.

Passersby stared at me for a few moments. Then, as though nothing had occurred, they went about their business.

I turned to the red-cloaked girl. “Well, that was quite impressive. Perhaps you didn’t need my help after all.”

She blushed, putting her arrow back in her quiver and pulling the bow over her shoulder. She rubbed her wrist where Max had grabbed her.

“Are you all right?” I asked. “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head quickly. Her large brown eyes took me in like a spooked doe in the forest.

“Well, he probably won’t be out for very long,” I said. “I would suggest you make yourself scarce before he comes to.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“It was the right thing to do,” I said, brushing off the sentiment. I nodded my farewell and started the soggy walk through the village.

To my surprise, she hurried to walk beside me. “That may be,” she said, rubbing her bruised wrist, “but it’s not every day someone stands up for me. Actually, it never happens. At least not in this village.”

I furrowed my brow. “You mean to say that happens often?”

“No, not usually,” she said. “Max was just sore because I wasn’t able to pay him the full amount I owe him.”

“What’s a girl like you doing owing a guy like that money anyway?” I asked. “Surely your father can handle those types of dealings.”

“My father’s dead,” she murmured.

I stopped in my tracks, turning to her. “I’m… I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed…”

“No, it’s all right,” she said.

I started walking again. “Why do you owe that man money? Was it your father’s debt?”

“No. I purchased some traps and a bow on credit from him last month. I hoped I’d have enough furs to cover the cost, but I came up short.”

“So, the old lady with the furs was telling the truth?” I asked, surprised. “You hunt in Blakx forest?”

“Just like my father,” she said proudly.

I stared at the girl and thought of my son. A child without a father, trying to make ends meet. Dealing with shop owners and townsfolk who thought less of them for it.

“How much do you owe this Max fellow?” I asked.

She blushed. “Five pieces of silver still.”

I stopped, pulling a pouch from my pocket. I fished out ten pieces of silver. “Here,” I said, placing them in her hand.

“No! I couldn’t,” she said, trying to give them back.

“I insist,” I said, putting the pouch back in my pocket. “Consider it a payment for the future. Perhaps you’ll be my passage into heaven one day.”

“Still, it’s too much,” she said. “I only owe the five.”

“It’s a gift,” I said. “For helping me with those two men.”

She laughed. “You mean the two men you wouldn’t have had a fight with if you hadn’t been helping me in the first place?”

I smiled at her. “Just put it to good use. Take care of yourself.”

She smiled, though still appearing shaken and embarrassed by my generosity. “Then allow me to give you something.”

She reached into her bag and pulled out a knife, but it was unlike any knife I had seen. It was made of a claw, bigger than that of any bear I had seen. It was black and razor sharp. She handed it to me.

“What kind of…?”

“Wolf,” she answered, knowing my question.

“The legends are true then?” I asked.

She nodded.

It was a beautiful piece. The claw itself had been set into the metal handle and worked over and over until it had a swirled pattern to the steel. “Certainly a piece like this would be worth much more than ten pieces of silver.”

“Yes,” she said. “But I refuse to sell it. It’s a piece that can only be gifted to someone who deserves it.”

She smiled up at me, her big brown eyes drinking me in like a child would look upon a father, begging for approval.

“Then I accept your gift,” I said, sliding the knife into my pocket. “Take care of yourself, little one. I won’t be around here every time you need a jaw broken.”

She laughed. “I will. And thank you… I don’t even know your name.”

“You can call me James.”

“I’m Rosalee. My gran calls me Rose,” she said. “But around here, everyone else calls me Red.”

"RED, HUH?" I MUSED. "CAN'T IMAGINE WHERE THAT INGENIOUS NAME came from."

She laughed. "Yeah, I suppose I do stand out a bit. My gran made this cloak for me. She said it's to protect me from the dark magic."

"At the very least you won't be mistaken for an animal in the woods." I laughed.

"What brings you to Ravenmore, James?" Red asked as we walked through the village. "I mean, besides saving me from the local rabble."

"My crew and I stopped for supplies," I said. "We're headed for Neverland."

"Neverland?" She gasped. "You wouldn't catch me sailing through Kraken-infested waters to that godsforsaken place."

I chuckled. “Too right. I must admit, it’s not a journey my men are looking forward to. But it’s a necessary evil.”

“Then you’re here for the ash,” she said bluntly.

I stopped walking and stared at her. “How do you know of such things?”

“I’ve spent my whole life in those woods,” she whispered, turning to see if anyone was near. “My father taught me everything there is to know about the forest and its secrets.”

Ash, the one substance thought to deter Krakens. Mind you, any old hearth or campfire ash wouldn’t do. The ash needed to scare off a beast like a Kraken required magic.

“What do you know of the ash?” I asked.

“My father told me when the Kingdom of Bruen split from these lands the king used the power of a great sorceress who sent out a magical flame so hot, the embers are still warm to this day,” she explained. “Those who know of the ash say if one were to take the ash out to sea and drop it in, it would cause the water to boil and roll.”

I was impressed. There were many sailors and pirates alike who didn’t know of the ash legend.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where I could purchase some, by chance?” I asked. “I’m afraid going through the village advertising my need for the substance would gain far too much attention.”

“There are few in the village who even know about it,” she said. “Many consider the forest to be a bad omen. Some of the villagers refuse to even eat any of the meat obtained there, for fear it will bring a curse on their house.”

“You said you frequent the forest, know its secrets,” I said. “Have you been there? Is it real?”

She nodded. “I’ve been to the far edge of the forest—once.”

Her eyes swam with emotion as she stared off toward Blakx forest.

“What is it?” I asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“That’s where… my father.” She sniffed, sitting down on an old log at the edge of the path. “We were going to gather the ash. He hoped it would make us enough to leave Ravenmore.”

“He wanted to leave?” I said, sitting down beside her.

“I wasn’t even born when the curse of the wolves came,” she explained. “Father had always been a hunter. He didn’t know any other profession. Once Bruen cut Ravenmore off, everyone struggled to make ends meet. He kept hunting game and trapping, even with the threat of the wolves. He was the only one brave enough to venture into the forest. Without him, many of these people would have starved.”

“Once Mother discovered she was going to have me, Father cut back on hunting. He didn’t want to leave Mother alone too long, and she feared he would be killed and she’d be left to raise me on her own.

“As I grew, Father began to teach me how to hunt and set traps. He didn’t take me into the woods, though, just on the edge. Mother didn’t like it, but he convinced her it was for my own good. He said everyone needed a trade, even a girl. Our family began to get a bad reputation. They would eat our meat and wear our furs, but they would talk about us behind our backs,” she continued.

“Father hated it. He wanted to leave Ravenmore. He used to say, ‘Let them fend for themselves for a season and see how full their bellies are by spring,’ when he would get really angry. One day, a boatload of pirates came through, talking about the ash. That’s when Father got the idea to get some to sell so we could finally leave this godsforsaken village.

“Last fall, he set out for the ash,” Red recalled. “I’m not sure if he knew I was following him. He was such a good hunter. Always said he could feel a field mouse watching him, so I doubt I could have followed him without him knowing. We had just reached the edge of the burned forest when he discovered me, called me out of the woods. He scolded me,

but he didn’t seem all that angry. Just told me Mother would be worried sick.

“That’s when I saw it—small red embers mixed amongst the ash. It looked fresh, as though the fire had just been quenched. The heat was still warm on my face. Beyond the edge was a wasteland of black tree corpses. The legend of the sorceress was true.” Red paused and took a deep breath.

“Father had brought a metal box to carry the ash in. He carefully scooped up the warm ash, sealing it inside the box. I remember asking him, ‘Why don’t we gather more to sell? We could make even more money.’ He told me we should not be greedy. That the gods would not bless us if we were to take more than was needed. So we headed back home with the small box full. The trip took longer than expected. Night fell before we could get back home.”

She went quiet, staring at her feet.

“What happened, Red?” I murmured.

“The wolves came,” she whispered. “They only come at night.”

I did not want to push her. She was reliving a terrible memory, something I could relate to.

“I’m sorry, love,” I rasped. “I… I can’t imagine…”

My words seemed to bring her out of her daze. She shook her head, her eyes clearing. “Since the night my father was killed, I have spent every day in the woods. I plan to kill them. Kill them all.”

“I’m sorry to ask,” I murmured. “But can you tell me what happened to the ash?”

“I still have it,” she said.

My heart seized in my chest. I didn’t want to speak, for fear I’d push her too far and she would deny me the ash.

She looked up at me with her large doe eyes. “I’ll give it to you.”

I sighed. “I’ll pay whatever price you wish. You will finally be able to afford to leave and take the rest of your family with you, just as your

father wanted."

"No," she barked. "I will not leave Ravenmore. Not until every last wolf is dead."

"But surely your mother—"

"Mother died a few months after Father," she murmured. "Grandmother says she died of a broken heart."

"Red… I…"

"There's nothing to be said about it." She sniffed, straightening her back and sticking out her chin. "What's done is done. All that is left is vengeance. And I will have it."

Vengeance, I thought. I had allowed it to fuel me for the past year as I sought out Pan. Yet, before me sat an orphaned girl of fifteen who had her whole life ahead of her and vengeance ate away at her.

Red stood. "Follow me."

I followed her to a hovel at the edge of the forest. The wood was weathered and rotten in some areas. The roof, covered with fir limbs to insulate and help the water drain better. Beside the home sat a little shed with smoke rolling from a chimney. The door was ajar, and I could see furs hanging inside.

She opened the door to the home, motioning for me to come in.

As humble as the outside was, the inside was cozy and warm. The walls and floor were lined with the pelts of wolves, keeping out the cold and the wet. The hearth burned hot, its embers glowing red.

"Home sweet home." Red laughed drily, closing the door behind her. She took off her red cape and hung it on a hook by the door.

"Rose?" came a feeble voice from a room in the back. "Rose, is that you?"

"Yeah, just me Gram," she replied. "Go back to sleep."

"Were you able to get to the alchemist?" her grandmother asked.

Red sighed. "Not yet, Gram. I'll go soon."

“Did you sell the furs?” her grandmother called. “Were you able to pay old Max?”

“Yes, Gram,” Red said. “Please, go back to sleep. You need your rest.”

Red quietly walked over and shut the door to what I assumed was the bedroom. She placed her finger over her lips and whispered, “She’s usually quite lively, but she’s down with a cold today.”

“Haven’t you the money for a doctor?” I asked.

“Doctor?” Red laughed. “You must not know Ravenmore very well if you think a doctor would be daft enough to linger in these parts. Too damn cold and wet, not enough supplies coming in. And let’s face it, no one has the money to pay a doctor.”

I felt embarrassed at my ignorance. Even I had a doctor on my ship. A village without a doctor didn’t seem possible.

“What do people do?” I asked.

I watched as Red walked over to a rickety bookshelf. She knelt on her hands and knees. Looking back at me she said, “They either get better or they die.”

Turning back to the bookshelf, she grabbed a stack of books off to reveal a hole in the wall behind. Reaching in, she pulled out a small metal box. She got up and handed the box to me.

It was still hot. Not burning, as though it had just come from a fire, but warm enough you didn’t want to hold it in the same place for too long.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“You’re the first person to treat me with some kindness in a long time,” she said. “I want you to have it.”

“Thank you, Red,” I said, putting it into my satchel. I pulled out my pouch of coins, handing the whole thing to her.

“No,” she said. “I don’t want your money.”

“I can’t with clear conscience take this without paying you,” I said, holding the pouch out to her. “Use the money to purchase more traps and

arrows, or medicine for your grandmother.”

She looked hesitantly at the pouch, seeing the potential. “I can’t.”

I set the pouch down on the table in the center of the room. “Well, it’s not leaving with me.”

Tears welled up her in her big brown eyes, though she fought to keep them from falling. As though she could no longer contain her emotions, she threw her arms around me and hugged me. “I believe the gods fated us to meet today, James.”

I hugged her, stroking her raven hair. “Aye. That they did.”

I said my farewell to Red and left Ravenmore behind me. I hoped she would find happiness. Perhaps she would take her grandmother and leave Ravenmore, along with the bad memories, behind.

Once I managed to get the men wrangled and back on the ship, we set sail for Neverland.

I gave Tinker Bell her chipmunk fur, which she accepted, though I had a feeling she had mixed feelings on the idea of sleeping on a dead animal's fur.

It didn't take me long to realize the wee fairy had an enormous heart. The three days it took us to reach Neverland were quite enjoyable with the little sprite. She was good at entertaining the men with stories and song.

At night she used her sparkling fairy dust to draw out the constellations in the sky, giving new life to those beloved stars.

On our second night at sea, she told us of the constellations called the God and Goddess.

“Where did you learn such things?” asked Mr. Bones.

“We fairies know all about the moon and the stars,” she explained. “Our people believe that fairies were born from the tears of the moon. The stars are the tears who got stuck in the blanket of night. From time to time, a tear will break free and fall to the earth. And so, a fairy is born.”

The men looked at each other in wonder.

“Captain?” called Hendrick, who was at the helm.

“Aye,” I called.

“Captain, you’ve got to see this,” he said, fear in his voice while he pointed to the water.

I ran to the rail and looked out. Fish of all shapes and sizes were on the surface, jumping out of the sea. From tiny fish to great sharks, they seemed desperate to be free from the water.

“What… what is that?” Tinker Bell asked, sitting on my shoulder.

“Captain?” asked Mr. Smee, coming to stand next to me. “What sort of omen is this? Why would fish want to flee the waters?”

My heart seized in my chest. “The only time fish act like this is when there is a bigger fish in the water.”

“Bigger fish!” cried Smee. “What’s bigger than sharks?”

“Kraken,” I murmured.

Tinker Bell gasped and clung tight to my jacket collar.

“Kraken!” shouted Smee. “Oh, we’re doomed!”

The word echoed over the ship like a flame spreading in a field. “Kraken!”

I grabbed Smee by the collar. “Pull yourself together, man. Keep your wits.”

“Captain, is it true?” whimpered Mr. Bones.

“Men, to your stations!” I called. “Mr. Bones, to the crow’s nest, keep your eyes open and inform me at once if you see anything.”

I ran to my quarters. “Tinker Bell, you stay here. It’s not safe out on deck.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked, retreating to her box. “They say a Kraken is death. That no one can survive an attack.”

“Just stay in your box until I fetch you!” I hissed.

I went to my bed, pulling up the mattress, and retrieved the metal box containing the ash. *Here’s hoping the legends are true, huh, Red?* I thought as I hurried out on deck carrying the box.

I climbed the stairs to the helm, two at a time, and relieved Hendrick of the wheel. I steered the ship hard to port, in the hopes of slipping away unnoticed. However, there was nowhere to run. If the Kraken had spotted the ship, our last hope would be the ash. And if the ash didn’t work, we were done for.

“We’ve a strong wind on our side!” I called. “Hoist the mainsail! Let Poseidon’s wind take us to safer waters.”

The ship sliced through the water as a strong gust filled the sails. We were beginning to clear the frightened fish that continued to leap from the water.

“Captain!” cried Mr. Bones from the crow’s nest. “Look! Starboard side!”

In the moonlight, I could make out the shadow of a large tentacle rising from the water on the starboard side of the ship.

“Gods help us,” I murmured. “Mr. Smee! You have the helm!”

Smee scrambled up the stairs. “What are you going to do, Captain? It’s marked us. We’re done for!”

“Just keep her steady, man!” I commanded.

I rushed down on deck, holding the box. Another tentacle had surfaced and was rising beside the other. On the port side, a third tentacle rose. *It plans to crush us*, I thought.

I opened the box and stared at the red embers and grey ash. “Please work,” I whispered. I turned the box over, letting some of the contents fall to the water’s surface. There was a loud hiss as the embers made contact with the cool sea water. Then, like any other ember would, they slipped beneath the surface.

I gazed at the water in disbelief. “It didn’t work. How could it not have worked?” I threw the box and remaining contents into the water and slammed my fists on the rail. “It has to work!”

The air filled with the stench of rotten fish as the creature’s great arms traveled higher into the air. I knew at any moment they would come crashing down over the boat, taking the *Jolly Roger*, my crew and me to the depths. To our deaths.

The men began to wail, cries of fear and prayers to the gods. I laid my face in my hands, fighting back the urge to weep myself. *My dear boy*, I thought. *I won’t be able to bring your murderer to justice. I’ve failed you.*

I could hear the water thrashing as the beast prepared to crush the ship. *No*, I thought. *I am the captain of this ship. I will not go down with tears in my eyes, hiding my face*. I took in a deep breath, standing up straight, and opened my eyes.

To my surprise, the thrashing of the waves was not caused by the movement of the Kraken. Instead, the water had begun to roil and boil, turning red like the sun was rising under the waves.

The tentacles began to sway violently in the air.

“It can still take us down if we stay here!” I called. “Get us out of here, Smee!”

I ran over to the boom of the mainsail, loosening the rope and pulling it so the wind pulled us away from the creature. Hendrick and several

other crew members joined me.

“Put your weight into it, men!” I cried, pulling back with all my might.

The wind caught in the sail, dragging the men and me several feet across deck before we got our footing. The ship quickly glided away from the scene.

Several other men joined us and held the boom taut. I ran to the helm to steer us to safety.

As I guided the ship away, I turned to see the red glow engulf the Kraken, like a lobster in a pot. Its great tentacles slammed down in the water as it fought against the boiling sea. It slipped into the rippling waves, the orange glow following it to the depths.

“What was that?” asked Smee, watching the scene unfold. “What did you put in the water?”

“It was a gift from a friend,” I said. “And we all owe her our lives.”

ON OUR THIRD DAY OF SAILING, THE SUN ROSE TO SHOW NEVERLAND ON the near horizon. “Land ho, Captain!” called Mr. Bones from the crow’s nest. “Neverland right ahead!”

A rush of excitement flowed through me. *I will finally get my revenge*, I thought. *Pan will finally pay for what he’s done.*

I went to the helm while my crew made ready the ship to come in to Shatterdrift, Neverland’s only port.

Tinker Bell flitted from the deck, landing on the wheel. “Are you ready for your ship to fly?”

“No,” I said. “You must wait until Pan is close or there will be no hope of catching him. He’s quick.”

“Why not just you fly then?” she asked, sitting down on the wheel and hanging her legs over the edge.

“I fear I haven’t the talent.” I sighed. “Steering a ship, I was born for it. But steering myself? Well, let’s just say I tried it once. It didn’t go well.”

I left out the part of how the fairy dust had been from Pan as a terrible prank. Had Smee not roped my ankle when he did, I could have been lost at sea when the magic finally wore off. It was a humiliating defeat, but it gave me the idea of getting the fairy dust to make the ship fly.

“But if I make your ship fly when this Peter Pan is around, you promise you will keep your word and release me?” she asked, looking up at me.

“On my word,” I said. “Once my ship is in the air, our deal has been met and you are free to do as you wish. But you should know, if you choose to stick around, it could be very beneficial. Just think about it. Tinker Bell, the notorious pirate fairy!”

Her laugh sounded as though tiny bells tinkled in the air. “A pirate fairy? I think not.”

“Captain! It’s Pan!” yelled Smee.

I looked up, seeing the silhouette of the boy against the morning sunrise zipping through the air. “Pan.”

Tinker Bell flew into the air. “Now?”

“Wait until he’s distracted,” I instructed. “He loves to talk. He enjoys taunting. While he’s busy goading us, use the distraction to spread the fairy dust.”

“As you wish,” she said, zipping off to hide.

I steered the ship near the docks, making it appear as though we were going into port. Pan rolled and flipped through the air, almost leisurely, making his way to us.

“Captain Shaw,” Pan said with a laugh in his voice. “Did you not get enough last time? Have you made sure to tie yourself to the ship so you won’t float away again?”

I ground my teeth together. “If you cared to fight like a man, we could end this fair and square.”

“Why would I want to fight like a man? I’m a boy!” Pan laughed, floating above the deck.

“You’re a feeble little bilge rat who couldn’t hold his own in a fair fight,” I spat. “You kidnap boys from their mothers’ arms and have them do your dirty work for you.”

Pan’s eyes widened at my words. I had struck a nerve. I hoped Tinker Bell was doing her job by preparing the ship to take flight.

“I do not kidnap them!” Pan cried. “They ask me to take them. They all want to live in Neverland.”

“Is that why you steal them in the night?” I accused. “While their mothers sleep and are unaware of your vile acts?”

“I do not!” Pan barked, getting upset.

“You steal them from their warm beds and condemn them to death,” I hissed.

“His death was not my fault!” Pan screamed, letting his adolescent emotions bubble to the surface. “It was an accident!”

“Tell that to his mother as she weeps for his soul,” I roared. “Never again will she be able to sing to him, nor hold his hand. You killed him the moment you kidnapped him.”

I drew my sword, pointing it at him. He flipped in the air, putting distance between us. His eyes were wild. My words had gotten to him, and he wasn’t thinking clearly. My men drew their swords, preparing to surround him.

Pan flew higher, just out of reach of Mr. Bones in the crow’s nest. He was going to run.

Come on, Tinker Bell, I thought. *Aren't you done yet?*

As though hearing my thoughts, she zipped from the bow of the ship through the air, hovering in front of my face. "All set, Captain. Simply steer her and she'll take you where you want. But be wary, the dust will only last an hour, if that."

"Aye, thank you," I said. "You have made good on your word. You may leave and return home."

As she zipped away, I grabbed the helm and turned hard to starboard. "To the gunwales, men! This day, Pan will pay for his evil."

Half the men went below deck to ready the cannons.

Pan hovered in the air. "When will you learn, Captain? Your cannons are no match for me. They can't aim high enough."

I gave the wheel a sharp, fast turn to port, causing the wind to catch the sails. The updraft filled them, pulling the ship into the air.

Pan nearly fell from the sky when he saw the ship take flight. "How? It's not possible!" He took off through the air, attempting to outfly us.

"Mr. Smee," I called, keeping the ship at an angle that would allow the cannons to fire.

"Yes, Captain," Smee said, his grip tight on the rail as the ship climbed higher.

"Instruct the men to use the grapeshot," I ordered. "He's too fast for a regular cannonball. Have them split their aim, some ahead and some behind. He'll have nowhere to fly when the shots fire."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Smee said, turning to go below.

The wind was in our favor; the ship easily gained on Pan. My best option was to distract him in order to bring his guard down.

"What's wrong, Pan?" I called. "Too scared to fight once the playing field is even? Can't win unless you have the upper hand and cheat?"

Pan stopped fleeing and turned to face me. "I do not cheat." His face turned red with anger.

“You’re a little boy who doesn’t know how to lose, so you cheat in order to always win,” I taunted. “Just a little boy throwing a tantrum.”

I could practically see the smoke billowing from his ears at my jeering. Like most young boys, Pan did not like to be teased.

The sky erupted with the sound of cannon fire. Small iron balls flew through the air toward Pan, surrounding him. *He has nowhere to go*, I thought. *Revenge is mine.*

The boy let out a loud scream of panic, trying to outmaneuver the shrapnel flying through the air. Even against the grapeshot he was incredibly fast and agile. A shot grazed his right shoulder and his left hip. Yet, he remained flying and alive. He zipped through the air, attempting to outclimb the height the ship could fly.

I worried time was about to catch up with us. *Even if we have an hour,* I thought, *we are running out of time.*

I turned the ship sharp, causing her to fishtail enough to line up the cannon wall with Pan.

The cannon shots rang out again, peppering the sky with smoke and grapeshot.

A single shot managed to make contact with Pan’s calf as he spun out of the way of the remaining gunfire. He screamed out as pain caused him to fall from the sky toward the water below.

“Yes!” I cried out in triumph. “Finally!”

The crew erupted in cheers; their elation could be heard even from below deck.

I steered the ship to follow Pan’s descent. However, as we touched the water, I couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Where are you?” I whispered under my breath.

The men came up on deck and leaned over the rail, checking for any sign of Pan’s body in the water.

“Perhaps he drowned,” Mr. Bones said.

“Maybe the sharks have him,” Mr. Smee said. “Or worse… the mermaids.”

“Find him!” I commanded, my eyes searching the surrounding waters. “If there is no body, we can assume he got away. Take out the longboats if you must, but I want proof.”

I turned the ship toward the Mermaid Lagoon.

“Captain!” called Mr. Bone’s from the crow’s nest. “Look!”

I gazed up at him to see where he was pointing. There, hovering in the air, was the body of Peter Pan. He lay unconscious, but he floated and was surrounded in a golden sparkling ball of magic.

“How is this possible?” Smee murmured.

Out of nowhere, Tinker Bell zipped out in front of my face. “Because I saved him.”

“You what?” I barked.

“Captain,” Tinker Bell said. “You have suffered a horrible loss. A loss nothing but time can repair. Do not muddy your son’s memory by killing a boy.”

“That *boy* is the reason my son is dead!” I screamed.

“That may be true,” she said, “but I cannot allow you to take his life.”

“We had a deal, fairy!” I yelled.

“Yes, we did. Our deal was for me to make your ship fly so you could pursue Pan,” she said, placing her hands on her tiny hips, her wings fluttering. “I did that. Our deal was done, and you said I could do whatever I wished.”

I clenched my teeth. “You double-crossing little…”

“Another condition of our bargain was you would help me free the fairies on this island that Pan had supposedly enslaved,” she chirped. “However, I feel no fairy magic here. You lied!”

“Look at him!” I pointed at Pan. “He’s dripping with fairy magic.”

“He does not possess fairy magic. His magic is something else,” she murmured.

“Give me the boy!” I shouted, reaching out to grab her. She quickly fluttered out of my grasp. “I will crush you into dust.”

“Dust?” She hovered before me, a short distance away. “Between the two of us, who do you think knows more about fairy dust?” She giggled then zipped into the air, taking the floating Pan boy with her.

WE SPENT SEVERAL OF THE FOLLOWING DAYS SAILING AROUND THE outskirts of the Mermaid Lagoon. I knew Tinker Bell had taken him in that direction, and it was the only lead I had.

It was the middle of the night. Most of the crew were asleep but for a few keeping watch. I wanted to sleep, but it would not come. I hadn't managed a wink since Pan escaped with that traitorous fairy.

I paced the deck, watching the skies. The stars shined bright against the velvet blanket of night.

As I walked the deck, I came across the newest member of my crew. A cabin boy named Elwin. He was green with no worldly experience of any sort. But he took orders well and had a willingness to learn.

"Captain?" asked Elwin.

“What is it, boy?” I asked, not bothering to take my gaze away from the wealth of stars overhead.

“Why do we not go through the lagoon?” he asked.

He was a young lad, no older than thirteen. It was likely he had never been on a ship until he joined my crew. Stories of the sea are nothing more than tall tales to those who kept to dry land.

“I dare not venture into the lagoon,” I said. “Mermaids be fearsome creatures and are known to take down entire ships of men.”

The young man’s mouth dropped open. “H-how do you know?”

“Books say the creatures come to the surface, singing and playing while others lay in wait below the waves,” I explained. “They use their song and beauty to lure unsuspecting sailors into the water, then they tear them to shreds. They leave no one alive.”

The inquisitive young lad’s brow furrowed. “If they leave none alive, how do the books know if it is true? Certainly some would have survived if mermaid legends made it into books.”

I studied him then let out a hearty laugh. “I suppose you have a point, my boy.” I ruffled his sandy hair. “Good to know at least one of my crew has a good head on his shoulders.”

Suddenly, from behind me, I heard a loud splashing in the water. Both Elwin and myself turned and leaned over the rail for a better look. The moon was full and allowed for a reasonable amount of visibility. Near the base of a cluster of large boulders, I could see movement and unnatural waves lapping against the stones.

When I saw an arm fling out of the water, desperately reaching for the rocks, I called, “Man overboard!”

The figure splashed and reached again, trying to get a grip on the slippery rocks. It would take too long to bring the ship about, and just as long to get a longboat in the water.

I yanked off my hat, belt and leather jacket, handing them to Elwin. “Hold these.” I slipped out of my boots, grabbed a rope coiled near my feet and tied it to the rail. I took the rope in my hand and dove overboard, kicking off the sturdy wood rail.

The salty sea water felt like a balm on a wound. Cool and refreshing, soaking into my soul. When I surfaced, I still had the rope in my hand. I could hear a scuffling up on the deck as the men brought the ship around and prepared to pull in the survivor and me.

I swam for the outcropping of rocks, following the sound of the frantic splashes. I got closer. In the pale moonlight I could see it was a woman, and she was struggling in a heavy fisherman’s net.

Dear God, I thought. *She’ll drown.*

I quickly crossed the distance between us. When I approached her, she broke the surface, gasping for air. “Help me,” she begged before going back under.

Still holding tight to my rope, I pulled the wolf claw dagger and began cutting the lines that held her under. She surfaced again, pulling through the hole in the net I made for her.

“Please help me,” she said, reaching out for me. “It’s too heavy.”

I reached out, taking her by the arm. “I’ve got you. Don’t be afraid.”

It wasn’t until I pulled her closer that I felt the heavy slam of a tail against my legs. “Oh dear God, mermaids!” I looked up at her, preparing to warn her, when I noticed a soft glint against her hairline on her forehead. “Scales. You’re a—” I quickly jerked away from her, swimming for the ship.

“No, please!” she cried. “I’ll die. It’s too heavy.”

I kept swimming as she pleaded, my heart and my head battling it out. *I can’t let her die,* I thought. *But she’s a mermaid; she’ll kill me as soon as I free her.* It was a gurgled scream followed by choking coughs that

brought me out of my internal battle. I stopped and turned back toward her.

She continued to cough as a wave brought up by the ship knocked her into the rocks and she slipped beneath the water. I waited, but she did not resurface. I dove under the water. The moon allowed for slight visibility just below the surface. I could make out a tangle of netting, black hair and arms slowly sinking beneath me.

I swam as hard as I could, fighting the current. I reached out for her, gripping her wrists before she could sink farther.

Pulling her to the surface, I gasped for breath. I wrapped one arm around her waist while twisting the rope around the other. “Pull us in!”

I kept a tight hold while the men pulled us up the side of the ship. Elwin and Mr. Smee grabbed hold of the net, helping to hoist up the mermaid.

When she fell on the deck before them, the men gasped; some drew their swords.

“It’s a mermaid!” one man said.

“We’re doomed!” cried another.

I quickly got to my feet. “Calm yourselves! You will not harm her unless given reason.”

Our ship’s physician hobbled through the crowd. “Let me through, I say. Let me through!”

“Dr. Hockley, she hit her head rather hard and went under,” I said, stooping beside the injured mermaid to cut the netting still partially tangling her. “Do you know what to do in the case of a mermaid?”

“Let’s have a look.” The old man placed a hand on my shoulder, using me to slow his momentum as he lowered himself to the deck on one knee.

I pulled the netting away from her, revealing beautiful iridescent gold scales that contrasted beautifully with her tanned skin. Her tail fin, like a beautiful sail, was almost translucent. Her scales met seamlessly with her

skin, fading at they traveled from her tail up to her torso. She was the most stunning creature I had ever seen.

Dr. Hockley examined her. He pulled back the long, wet hair from her face and neck, exposing a set of gills behind her ear.

“Blimey, she’s more fish than lady,” Mr. Bones said, shock written all over his face as he backed away, bumping into others.

“Calm yourself, Bones,” I said, turning back to the physician. “Does this mean she needs to be back in the water? Can they not breathe our air?”

“She’s breathing now, Captain,” Hockley said, pointing to the soft rise and fall of her chest. She wore a makeshift corset, made up of what appeared to be sail material and shells. “It seems they’re made for both water and air. She probably couldn’t get enough air from either while tangled in the net.”

I reached under her, hoisting her into my arms as I stood. “I’m going to take her to my quarters until she wakes. Hockley, you’re with me. Smee, you’re at the helm; get us away from the Mermaid Lagoon. I want five men outside my chambers, should I need them. Everyone else, back to work.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” they called in unison.

I carried her into my chamber, Hockley shutting the door behind us. I laid her on a loveseat I had stolen from a wealthy duchess, who had a taste for pirate.

“Will she be all right in here?” I asked, laying a blanket over her tail. “Does she need water to stay alive?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Captain,” Hockley said, scratching his long grey beard.

I reached out to stroke the mermaid’s cheek when her eyes flew open and she screamed. She began flopping about on the loveseat and fell to the floor in obvious distress. The men outside my chambers tore through the doors, their swords drawn.

I raised my hands to grab their attention. “Stop! Do not harm her!”

Gently, I reached out a hand. “Miss, we mean you no harm. I dove in and saved you, remember? You were caught in the net?”

My words seemed to calm her. She turned her head to look at me, her gorgeous honey eyes surveyed me carefully.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I remember now. Thank you, sir.” She reached out and took my hand. “I would have died had you not come to my aid.”

I leaned in, gently kissing her hand. “It was my pleasure, my lady. Always happy to help.”

“And what do they call you?” she asked, taking her hand away.

“Captain Jameson Shaw, my dear,” I said with a bow. “And this is my humble crew. We are all at your service Miss …”

“Zerena,” she said. “I am called Zerena.”

“Well, Zerena, I’m guessing you would much rather be in the water right now,” I said, looking at her grand tail.

“Oh,” she said, glancing down at her scales. “It shouldn’t be but another moment or two.”

“A moment or two for what?” I asked.

I jumped back as her tail turned into a pair of long, beautiful legs.

“Blimey!” cried one of the men. “She’s a witch!”

“Now hang on,” I said, slightly uncomfortable at the transformation myself. “I’m sure there is a perfectly good explanation for this.”

“He’s right,” she said, standing up carefully. “I’m considered a witch among my people.”

My heart seized in my chest. Not only was she a mermaid, known to be a fierce and murderous creature, but she was a witch?

“I’m afraid I simply don’t understand,” I said, taking a few steps away from her. “You’re a witch… a… a sea witch?”

She chuckled. “I guess you could put it that way.” She looked at me, noticing my posture. “Don’t worry, I’m not a witch in the terrible, horrible

sense. Yes, I possess magic, but I only wish to help people. Many cannot afford the help of King Neptune, so I offer my services at less of a cost."

"King Neptune?" Hockley said. "I thought Neptune was the god of the sea?"

"I guess he is, to some," she said, sitting back down on the loveseat. "To me, he's an older brother who doesn't wish to share the love of our people with his sister."

"Then you're a princess?" I said, not believing what I was hearing. "You're the sister of Neptune?"

"As I live and breathe. Thanks to you," she said with a smile. "How can I ever thank you?"

I was speechless. For the first time in my entire life, I didn't have a single word to express my shock and awe. I simply shook my head and shrugged.

"Now come, there must be something I can do," she urged.

"Wait a minute," Hockley said. "If you're a witch, why did our captain have to save you from a net? Shouldn't a witch be able to best a simple fishing net?"

"A simple net *would* be very easy; however, it was no plain fishing net," she said, her eyes saddened. "Like I said, my brother does not like to share the love of our people. When he found out I was becoming more powerful than he was and how I was helping the merfolk behind his back, he banished me from Atlantis. He wrapped me in that accursed net."

"You mean to say he would see you dead?" I asked, coming out of my shock.

"Since we were children, Neptune has strived to be the favorite among our people," Zerena said. "While he was busy being groomed to be the future king, I was overlooked. It allowed me to learn more magic than him, and it let me spend time with the merfolk of Atlantis. They grew to

love me because I don’t treat them as though I am more important or any better than they are.”

I turned to Hockley and the other men who had burst in. “Leave us. I wish to speak with her alone. If I need you, I will call for you.”

The men obeyed, closing the door behind them.

“So, you’re telling me Neptune, king of the seas, is a conceited tyrant who would rather kill his own sister than allow her to help his people?” I asked, eyebrows raised in shock. It was deplorable. How evil could you be?

“I’m afraid so,” she said. “The people had started rumors of me taking over the crown,” Zerena said. “I didn’t want it, mind you. I told him time and again, but he saw me as a usurper and nothing more.”

I sat down next to her on the small loveseat. “I’m so sorry.”

A tear the color of molten silver slid down her cheek. She was an amazing creature. The kind of creature that could come in useful. *Perhaps the Fates have crossed our paths for a reason,* I thought.

“Where will you go, if not back to Atlantis?” I asked.

“The ocean is a big place,” she said, forcing a smile. “I might travel to other realms for a while.”

I furrowed my brow, looking down at my hands.

“What is it?” she asked, placing a hand on my arm.

“Would you be gone long?” I asked. “How would I ever find you again?”

“You would want to see me again?” she questioned suspiciously, leaning away. “I’m told pirates want nothing more than to take mermaids and keep them locked away as prizes or to sell them to land merchants to put on display.”

Somebody knows their history, I thought.

“Well, I’ve been told mermaids are vicious creatures that lure sailors to their deaths.”

“It would seem we’ve both been painted as monsters,” she said, relaxing.

“Aye, it has.” I sighed. “What say you we prove history wrong and you be a friend to this lonely pirate?”

I was laying the charm on thick, but I knew I only had one shot at catching her eye.

“I suppose I could stick around for a while,” she said with a smile. “If you want me to. The ocean will still be there next week.” She stood to her feet. “But I think, for now, I should go.”

“Already? But we just met,” I said, standing to join her. “You’re so amazing. There’s so much I would love to learn about you. Like I said, I’ve been told mermaids are evil and would rather tear a man to shreds than talk to him.”

“We’ll talk soon. And I promise not to tear you apart,” she said with a laugh, walking to the door. “I still have friends in Atlantis. I must get word to them of my escape… or rather my rescue.” She winked.

I followed her out onto the deck. The men gasped when they saw her walk out on two long legs.

“When will I see you again?” I asked, brushing my hand against hers.

She looked to the full moon in the sky. “Tomorrow night, when the moon is at its peak, I will be here by the rocks where you rescued me.”

I reached out, taking her hand one last time and kissing it gently. “Until tomorrow night.”

She gave me a beautiful smile, then turned and dove into the water right from the deck. I leaned over the edge in time to see the splash from her golden tail before it slipped beneath the dark water.

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, I PACED THE DECK OF MY SHIP WAITING. WE dropped anchor near the rock outcropping we rescued Zerena from. The moon had reached its apex, and I was beginning to grow impatient. *Perhaps she was trying to save her skin,* I thought. *What if it was all part of some joke by Pan? Or a ruse to find out my plans?* I tried hard to push the negative thoughts away as I scanned the water for movement.

I had almost given up hope and returned to my quarters when I heard a splashing in the water. I ran to the rail, looking over.

"Hello, Captain," Zerena said with a smile.

I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face. "Hello to you," I said, dropping a rope in the water beside her. I pulled her aboard and

wrapped her in a blanket, giving her tail a chance to dry. “I see you’re a lady of your word.”

“Did you doubt I would come?” she asked, rubbing the blanket over her tail.

“Not at all,” I lied. The truth was, I still didn’t know what to think of the mermaid. She was beautiful, yes, but they were known to be deadly. However, having a mermaid in your back pocket, especially one who was gifted in magic, was a very valuable asset.

After a few more moments, her tail changed into legs, and she wrapped the blanket around her waist. I extended my hand, helping hoist her to her feet.

“Thank you,” she said, adjusting the blanket.

“I’m still so amazed you can do that,” I said, looking at her long, sun-kissed legs. By the looks of them, she spent more time out of the water than in it. “I’ve never heard of a mermaid who could have legs.”

She laughed. “I assure you, there are few who can. It takes a great deal of magical bloodline to pull off such a spell.”

“And Neptune? Can he also change?” I asked.

Her face soured. “He believes the only good life is a life of a mermaid. I’m sure he could, but he never would. He believes land folk are beneath him.”

Note to self, steer clear of King Neptune, I thought. “I would love to talk more with you, get to know you better. Would you join me for a glass of rum in my cabin?” I held out my hand.

She placed her hand in mine. “I would love to.”

Once she was comfortably seated in the cabin, I pulled out a bottle of my best rum and poured us both a glass. “My lady,” I said, handing it to her.

“Thank you,” she said. She sniffed the amber liquid, then took a small sip, nearly choking as she coughed. “It’s horrible!”

I laughed. “Not at all! This is like mother’s milk. You haven’t adjusted. I promise, it gets better the more you drink.” I tossed back my glass, gulping down the contents.

She took another sip, stifling a gag. I cleared my throat, trying not to laugh.

As I watched her, I noticed she wore a necklace around her neck. It looked like a large glass dome. Inside were tiny glowing shells of various colors. “Your necklace,” I said, pointing to it. “It’s quite unusual.”

She looked down, holding it to her chest. “Yes, it’s very special to me.”

I extended my hand, leaning forward to look at it closer. There were several tiny shells inside, a bit of sea-glass shards, even what appeared to be one of those little seeds that floats on the wind during summer.

“Does it harbor magic? I only ask because it’s glowing.” I gave her a wink.

Zerena giggled. “Yes, that’s a pretty good sign. Each of these shells is a talisman. A spell I have enacted.”

I looked at her warily. “So, if you were to cast a spell on me, I would have a little shell in there?”

She laughed. “No, these are nothing like that. Just small spells really. Protection for myself and those I love. If I wanted to change the color of my scales, I could do so. Change my eyes from gold to green. That sort of thing.”

I smirked. “Vanity spells, eh?”

She blushed. “Among other things.”

“So, Zerena, tell me more about yourself,” I said, pouring myself another glass of rum. “I’ve never had the opportunity to speak with a mermaid.”

She smiled sweetly. “Well, you already know I’m the sister of Neptune. What more is there to tell?”

“Everything,” I said with another wink. “You’re a beautiful, amazing creature who deserves her own story. You are not just *Neptune’s sister*. You’re Zerena, goddess of the sea.” Yes, I was laying it on pretty thick. But I not only wanted to gain her trust, I wanted to gain her favor.

She blushed. “What would you like to know?”

I shrugged. “Anything. Do all mermaids have magic like you?”

“Oh no,” she said. “Only Neptune and I do. We were selected by the gods.”

“So, the rest of the mermaids are… normal?” I asked. I supposed normal was the wrong word to use, but I didn’t really feel anything else fit. How normal could you be when you looked like a human but for a great tail and gills?

She giggled. “Yes. Most merfolk simply wish to live their lives in peace.”

“Then the stories of mermaids ripping men into fish food, sinking boats and ships, those are false?” I asked, my interest piqued.

“Well…” She bit her lip, toying with a strand of hair. She glanced down quickly before looking back up at me. “There is some truth to it, actually. You see, my people were once peaceful with all manner of folk, but the allure of mermaids caught on quickly.” She sighed, looking down at her hands in her lap. “My people were hunted—to be taken as mermaid brides or to be used in magic spells and potions. Some were captured to be used in traveling shows, carted from realm to realm as a form of entertainment. Many of my people were captured and killed simply so their skeletons could be hung above tavern doors or from the bows of ships.”

I thought of the mermaid that adorned my bow. Though it was carved of wood, it was still a symbol of the persecution her people had undergone. I reached out, taking her hand in mine. “I’m so sorry, Zerena. I had no idea.”

“It was the evil committed against the mermaids which drove them to their vicious ways,” she said, wiping a stray tear from her cheek. “Over the generations, merfolk learned not only to fear those who reside above the water, they learned to hate them.”

“They began seeking out ships, didn’t they?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, looking up with sad eyes. “My brother, Neptune, he encourages it. It’s the only time he returns to the surface.”

“You mean he purposely comes to the surface just to kill… to kill pirates?” I asked. My stomach began to twist in knots. He could show up at any time, I needed to get my ship as far away from the Mermaid Lagoon as possible.

“Only if they are seeking out my kind,” she said. “If he gets a report of pirates in the area, or boats of any kind really. But the years of killing, hunting, hurting… it has turned Neptune into a cold and unforgiving merman. He was once such a gentle soul.”

“Is that why you started using your magic?”

“Partly,” she said. “Neptune lost his gentleness. Instead of being the caring and helpful king he used to be, he became a tyrant. He demanded payment for help. If merfolk couldn’t pay, he turned them away or punished them. That is when I started using my own magic to help others. I spent hours learning and honing my skills to get better.”

I picked up the bottle of rum and poured me another glass. Her glass remained barely touched as she stared at it. I didn’t want to push her too hard for information, so I sat quiet, waiting for her to continue.

She stood and went to the window. Her delicate fingers played upon the glass as she looked out at the water. “My brother found out. He got word I was going behind his back. He came to confront me, tried to use his magic on me.” She stifled a sob. “I fought back. That’s when he realized I had grown strong with my magic.”

I set down my glass and walked to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry.”

She turned, looking up at me with tear-stained cheeks. “That’s when he banished me, wrapping me in the spelled net. If you had not come along, I would have died.” She wrapped her arms around me, sobbing into my shoulder.

“Don’t cry, lass,” I said, guiding her to sit back down. “I know it’s hard, but you made it through.” I felt guilty as I watched her tears fall. Here was a beautiful mermaid who dedicated her life to helping those in need, and all I could think of was wooing her so I could use her when I needed her. Yes, she might help me get to Pan, but at what cost? She deserved to be cherished and treated fairly.

I pulled out a handkerchief, handing it to her. She brought it to her face, wiping her tears. “Thank you. You’ve been so kind to me in all this. You rescued me, even after you discovered I was a mermaid. For all you knew, I was a bloodthirsty killer.”

“I can tell a damsel in distress when I see one.”

She smiled. “What were you doing in this area? If you were worried about mermaids, you picked a rather strange place to sail.”

I swallowed hard. It was a reasonable question. Did I dare tell her about my vendetta with Pan and risk her knowing him? He spent a great deal of time around the Mermaid Lagoon; he could very well be on speaking terms with some of them.

“Captain?” she asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Oh… right, yes,” I said. “That is to say, I’m here looking for someone.”

“Who?”

“Um… Well, he’s a… a criminal,” I said, straightening my shoulders. “He was responsible for the death of someone close to me, and I want him brought to justice.”

“And he’s in Neverland?” she asked. “You think he’s near the lagoon?”

“It’s the last place I saw him. He was headed that way three days ago, and I haven’t any better leads.”

“Who is he?” she asked, eyes full of curiosity.

“Just… just someone,” I said, fearful to speak the truth. “If you stay below, chances are, you wouldn’t know him.”

“Yes, but I could help you look,” she said, placing a hand on my arm. “I can go places you can’t. I’m banished from Atlantis, but I can still search the lagoon and surrounding shores. Please, let me help you.”

My heart seized as it battled against my head. This was exactly what I had desired. I wanted to win her over so she would help me find Pan. But wasn’t I simply using her to get what I sought? What would happen to her once I exacted my revenge on Pan? It wasn’t like I would stick around the Mermaid Lagoon and be able to see her. *But she could come with me for a while, I suppose,* I thought. *Perhaps a mermaid on our voyages could be a good luck charm.*

I took a deep breath. “His name is Pan. Peter Pan.”

“Peter Pan?” She murmured the name. “Yes, I have heard of him. Word under the surface is he frequently flies over the lagoon and teases the mermaids who play there.” She stared at me thoughtfully. “You said he is the reason someone you loved died. Who?”

I fought back the tears that wanted to come. Tears were weakness, even in the case of losing a child. A pirate captain could never be considered weakened or he risked losing his ship, crew and life. “My son. He kidnapped my boy.”

She covered her mouth, stifling a gasp.

“I didn’t even know I had a son until I got word last fall,” I said, drawing up the memory. “His mother had been a wench in a village called Wildedale. It’s a port village on the shores of Brackengulch.”

Her bemused expression told me she had no idea such a place existed.

“Anyway,” I continued, “it was a one-time fling. I’d been to Wildedale several times during the past twelve years, but it took eleven of those years to run into her. I think she was trying to keep him from me. Not that I can blame her. Pirates don’t make the best fathers.”

“But to keep him from you…”

“Like I said…” I took a swig of rum. “I’m not the fatherly type. She was doing what she thought best by him, and by herself, mind you. It is no easy task being a woman with a bastard.”

“Why did she tell you?” she questioned. “Why, after so many years, did she decide to let you know?”

A smile grew on my face as I recalled the memory. “As I told you, I had visited Wildedale several times during the years but never came across her. I suppose I could have looked harder, but it had only been the once. Anyway, last spring, my crew and I had come into port one early morning and went about our business, replenishing supplies. While waiting to purchase some grain, I overheard the shop owner cursing a woman… something about ‘I don’t allow rabble in my store, you thief’ or something along those lines.” My expression darkened. “It was her; Yvonne was her name. She was much thinner and gaunt than I remembered. Her beautiful brown hair had lost its luster. Years of fending for her and the boy, barely making it by, it takes its toll.”

“But it wasn’t your fault,” Zerena defended. “You didn’t know. I’m sure she could have located you if she tried.”

“Aye, when my crew blows into port, there are very few who don’t know we’re about. But I still feel she was trying to protect the boy. In her own way.”

“Protect him from what?”

“The truth,” I murmured. “I’m not sure which is frowned upon more: being a bastard or being the bastard of a notorious pirate.”

“Oh.” Zerena stared into her hands. “Well, then what happened? When she saw you, I mean.”

“It was I who approached her, actually. When she laid eyes on me, she burst into tears. It was as though the weight of her lie had broken her at the mere sight of me. Just about that time, the boy ran up, accusing me of harassing his mother. It didn’t take me long to put two and two together. His dark hair, blue eyes. It was like looking into a mirror to the past. With a little urging, Yvonne explained everything… to both my son and me.”

“I can’t imagine something like that. Not knowing you had a child,” Zerena said. “How did it feel when you found out?”

“At first I felt nothing,” I said, taking another gulp of rum. “Well, not nothing, more like numb. Like when you plunge into ice water and you get to a point where you are no longer able to feel your body.”

She gave me a strange look. Chances were she had no clue what I was referring to. Probably another benefit of being a mermaid.

“After finding her and the boy,” I continued, “I extended my stay in Wildedale a week in order to get to know the lad. He was a bright boy, such a joy, really.” My words trailed off as the pain of loss rushed over me.

“Why did Pan take him?” she asked, her voice just over a whisper.

“He likes to take young boys to be part of his crew… his Lost Boys he calls them,” I said, jaw clenching. “He comes to them in the middle of the night, sneaking through their bedroom windows. He steals them away to Neverland and trains them to fight with swords, knives, whatever weapon he can muster.”

“Why do boys need to fight?” she asked, brow furrowed in confusion. “Neverland is peaceful.”

“It’s play fight, mostly,” I said. “But Pan has a taste for causing trouble. Any ship sailing by gets attacked by him and his band of Lost Boys. It was in one such attack when my son was killed, run through with a blade.” I squinted my eyes shut to push the tears back down.

“How did you find out?”

I sucked in a breath, trying to rein in my emotions. I felt bewildered having divulged so much to her.

She placed her hand atop mine, which was squeezing my knee. “If it’s too hard for you to sp—”

“No,” I interrupted. “It’s fine. I’m fine, truly.” I swallowed hard. “Yvonne got word to me. So I sought out Pan. Before that day I had never met the lad, though I’d heard talk of the boy who flies over Neverland.

“When I finally located him and his band of misfits, my son was already dead. It was a Lost Boy named Tootles who told me how it happened. Pan just stood there staring at me as Tootles explained to me how my son had died.

“I challenged Pan, right then and there. Told him if he was man enough to lead his army into a battle, he should be man enough to fight me to the death.”

I grew silent, recalling the memory with such clarity. As though it were happening all over again.

“Am I to assume he did not accept your challenge?” Zerena spoke softly.

“He flew off blubbering like an infant,” I hissed. “Pan turned his back on me, on his Lost Boys. We could have killed the lot of them or taken them prisoner if we were the sort to do such things. He didn’t care. Pan just ran.”

Zerena reached out, squeezing my hand. “You deserve vengeance. Your son was taken from you before you had a chance to be with him. This Pan has no right taking children, teaching them the ways of violence.”

“I’ve tried.” I sighed. “For the past year I have searched, fought and lost. He’s bested me at every turn. His ability to fly makes it impossible to get a fair fight.” I slammed my fist on the little table beside the loveseat,

causing my glass of rum to jump and splash. “I must get him. He must pay for my son’s death.”

Zerena took my face in her hands, turning me so her gaze met my eyes. “You will. Let me help you. Let me help you avenge your son.”

FOR SEVERAL DAYS, I EXPLORED NEVERLAND. I MADE EFFORTS ON BOTH land and sea to find Pan, but to no avail. It was as though he had retreated into the dark jungles of the island to escape my grasp.

Zerena was helping as well. She searched the shores and the areas of the lagoon where my men and I couldn't go safely. Pan was nowhere to be found.

One afternoon, a storm began to roll through the area. The winds were strong and I was forced to go inland and seek shelter at the inn.

"Drop sail and anchor!" I commanded, steering the *Jolly Roger* a short distance from shore. I didn't dare leave my beloved ship at the docks should the waves become too wild and smash her into them. "Prepare the longboats, Mr. Smee. We've enough time to make it inland."

Men scurried about the ship, securing cargo and grabbing their belongings to take with them. I had no doubt they would be spending some of their hard-earned wages at the tavern on rum and the pleasure of unsavory women. What they did with their money was their own business. They needed only do as they were told the next morning, hangover or not.

I ran to my cabin, grabbing a few things I thought I might need. It would take a great deal of digging to find my real stash, and the skeleton crew I was leaving behind would see to defending the ship.

My boat was the last lowered into the water. The waves were already beginning to swell as we slowly paddled our way to shore.

My men were waiting for me when I stepped foot on dry land. We were heading for the inn when I heard laughter carried on the wind. Turning, I saw Pan standing on the end of the dock.

He had his hands on his hips. His torn pants showed the wounds inflicted by the grapeshot had been bound with leaf poultices. He was muddy from head to bare toe and wore a mischievous grin. “Still looking for me, Captain?”

My men and I drew our swords. “Looks like you’re still recovering from your wounds.”

Pan shrugged. “Lucky shot.”

“You’re the one who’s lucky,” I taunted, taking a few carefully placed steps forward. “If not for the fairy I brought, you would have died that day.”

“If not for Tinker Bell, you wouldn’t have gotten the shot in the first place,” Pan quipped. “She told me how you kidnapped her and made her use the dust on the ship.”

Another step. “I merely offered her a mutually advantageous business deal. She failed to see the benefits and made the wrong decision at the end.” Two more steps.

I had gained quite a bit of ground on Pan as we spoke. Whether he didn't notice, or was too cocky to care, I didn't know. My men, too, slowly advanced behind me as I went. I couldn't catch him, but a carefully thrown dagger could bring him down.

"I'm done, Captain," Pan said. "No more chases. Let's end this right here, right now."

A heavy wind knocked against us as the storm front poured over the island. A crack of thunder rolled through the air as lightning struck the water. Pan started at the sound.

I chuckled. "A battle to the death, is it?"

"Yes," he said. "My army against yours."

"Your army?"

The sound of a horn echoed through the air, followed by battle cries. I turned on my heel to find the Lost Boys storming up the beach toward us, their swords and other weapons in hand.

"At the ready, men!" I cried, turning to face Pan. "Let's finish this, boy."

Pan kicked off the dock, sailing through the air toward me, his sword pointed forward. I dug my heels in as I ran for him, stopping short so I could brace when our swords made contact.The sound of metal clinking echoed over the thunder and crashing waves.

I grabbed him by the wrist when our swords came together again, pulling him toward me. He had the advantage of flying, but I was larger and stronger.

"Let go!" he cried, struggling against my iron grip.

"To the death, remember?" I hissed, flinging him to the ground, straddling him. "Justice is finally served." I brought my sword up over my head to strike him down.

As I did, one of the Lost Boys slammed into me. The force threw me back on the dock, the wind knocked out of me. I kicked off the lanky boy,

causing him to fall in the water. Still gasping from the blow, I watched as Pan helped the boy up on the dock.

“Go, Nibs,” Pan ordered. “The captain is mine.”

I pulled myself to my feet. “Did you show the same amount of care for my son before you got him killed?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Pan cried. “It was an accident.”

“An accident,” I said, walking closer. “Stubbing your toe is an accident. Breaking your mother’s favorite teacup is an accident. Getting a tear in your coat is an accident. My son died because of you! Don’t you dare say his death was just an accident!”

I lunged at him, pressing forward with my sword. He countered each move like a swordsman three times his years.

His exceptional skill angered me more, causing my blood to boil. The fury gave me a new strength as I pressed forward. Pan’s face was turning red, sweat beading on his brow, as I brought my sword down again and again.

“You’re looking a bit peaked boy,” I goaded.

I had the upper hand. Pan was exhausted. Just as our swords came together, I grasped the brat by the wrist. “You’re mine, boy!”

He gasped. Eyes wide with fear, he knew he was spent.

A crack of lightning danced across the sky, sending a role of thunder in its wake. A large wave came in, washing over the dock, knocking us both on our backs; we scrambled to stay out of the water.

As I jumped back to my feet, I looked up and saw my men driving the Lost Boys back down the beach. *Grown men are too much for young boys, even boys with swords and handmade clubs*, I thought.

“Give it up, Pan,” I yelled, turning my sword back on him. “Your little boys are nothing compared to my crew. You will never win against us. Your only option is to surrender; spare your Lost Boys.”

“Never!” Pan yelled, kicking off the dock and flying toward me. We crashed together just as a large wave washed over us.

The blow knocked the wind out of me. I gasped, salt water filling my lungs, burning as my body fought against the poison liquid. I broke the surface and coughed, expelling the water. The air burned, but I pulled it in.

I had a moment to take a deep breath before another crushing wave pushed me under. I became disoriented. I struggled for what I thought was the surface as undercurrents pulled me out to deeper waters. As a lifelong sailor, I was a skilled swimmer and had the ability to hold my breath for many minutes in normal circumstances. However, there was nothing normal about this situation. The pressure of the waves tossed me about. My body was weak and fighting against me as the oxygen loss and water intake teamed up to shut my mind down.

I could see the dim light of the surface above me. *I can make it,* I thought. *Just a few more moments and I can breathe.* I felt my fingers reach cool air when they broke the surface, just as another wave came down, pushing me back to the depths. One of the longboats tied to the dock must have come loose, because it slammed down on me. The blow alone was enough to kill a man, but I wasn’t so lucky. I became tangled in the ropes and was pulled down with it.

It had only been a matter of seconds, but the burning in my lungs and the weakness of my body made it feel as though I had been struggling through it for hours.

I willed my body to fight against the ropes, but I was simply out of strength and my body demanded air. My eyes fluttered shut, my lungs seizing and causing me to gasp. Salt water filled my lungs. My vision went black and my body stopped struggling. The last thing I saw was a pair of blue eyes surrounded by auburn hair floating like gold fire in the water.

I CAME to as my lungs pushed the salt water out, wheezing as I filled my lungs with air. I coughed hard, my body forcing it out. It took me several gasps to catch my breath. *I'm alive,* I thought. *But how?* I stared up at the angry sky, continuing to pull great lungfuls of air in with each gasp. I struggled to sit up on my elbow. I was lying on the sandy beach, but nowhere near where my ship was docked. I searched the area. I could have sworn someone was with me. Hadn't there been a woman? Light wisps of auburn hair floating around my face?

I managed to sit up fully, taking in my surroundings. It was raining now, the sky still ominous. The wind was beginning to die down a bit. The waves were not quite as furious as they splashed up the shore in great white peaks. I surveyed the beach but could see no one. "Hello?" I called out against the squall. "Is there anyone there?" It could very well be a long trek back to the dock. Who knew how long the current pulled me along?

I groaned when I pushed myself to my feet, taking in another deep breath. Perhaps it was the near-death part, but the air smelled a lot sweeter. As I moved, I heard a loud splash in the water. It wasn't the typical sound of waves rolling up the shoreline. It resembled that of a dolphin breaching… or a shark coming in for a closer look. I turned, searching the water. "Oh." The area looked very familiar. "The Mermaid Lagoon!" I had to leave as soon as possible. If a mermaid saw me, there was no guarantee it wouldn't come after me.

I urged my exhausted body to run, but heard another loud splash. I set my gaze on the water, and that was where I first saw her. Her eyes were as blue as the sky on the clearest of sunny days. Her hair, even wet, appeared to be a light auburn. She was sitting in the water and her beautiful blue tail flipped, splashing again.

I didn’t know what to do. It was the girl from earlier, I was certain. She stared at me, appearing to be as unsure of me as I was of her.

“He-hello?” I shouted against the wind, raising my hands. “I’m not here to harm you. I fell in the water. I was…”

“Drowning?” she questioned. “Yes, I know.”

“So it was you who saved me?” I asked, taking several steps forward.

She quickly moved back into the deeper water.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” I said, lowering myself to my knees so I appeared smaller, less threatening. “I simply wanted to thank you. I would have died if you hadn’t saved me.”

“Should I have?” she asked.

“What?” I asked, brow furrowing.

“You were going to kill the boy. Should I have saved you?”

“Oh, you saw that.”

“Yes,” she snapped. “He is my friend.”

The idea of this creature calling Pan a friend fanned my anger. “Well, perhaps you should have let me die then. I’m certain it’s what he would have done, given the choice.” *It’s what he did with my son.*

I jumped to my feet and began trudging down the sandy shore. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the movement of her swimming along the surface. She was following me at a safe distance, curiosity in her expression.

I stopped and turned toward her. “What do you want? I said thank you and you said you weren’t sure if you should have saved me. I think we’re done here.”

She stared at me. Her piercing blue eyes made me feel as though she could read my soul. Then, as suddenly as she appeared, she stiffened her shoulders and did a flip, going under the water. I stood for several minutes, certain she would sneak back up on me when I wasn’t looking, but she didn’t return.

When I was sure she was gone, I began my long journey back to my ship and crew.

After the storm passed, I was able to make my way back to the port village and locate my crew. They were all well, if not a bit soggy, and had been combing the waters and beaches for me.

I made the executive decision to spend a few nights inland. The men were in need of some warmth that only rum and lovely ladies could provide.

After commandeering a set of dry clothes, I claimed a room and spent the next day in bed, only rising to stir the fire from time to time.

The following evening, I dared to venture out in the village. I wandered the dirt paths, watching the locals conversing over a pint, children playing ball in alleys, tavern girls making eyes at passersby.

I meandered through the village and found myself back on the beach. Not having just drowned, I managed to enjoy its beauty slightly more than the previous day.

The waves gently lapped against the white sands while seagulls searched the shoreline for small fish and crabs. The breeze glided through the air, making the leaves of the palm trees dance and sway.

Farther down the beach, I made out the dark shape of an upturned boat. It was one of the longboats we had tied to the dock before the storm. I walked up to it and kicked the side of it, causing several crabs to scurry onto the sand. The seagulls cackled and tried to catch them before they could make it to the water.

I sat down on the broken vessel; the wood squeezed under my weight.

“I see you made it,” came a voice from the water.

I jumped to my feet, scanning the surf.

“At least you fared better than your boat,” came the sweet voice again.

I continued to search in the light of the setting sun. I spotted a glint of sparkle under the water near the shore. Slowly, as though she knew she had been spotted, the little mermaid emerged from the water. Her light auburn hair hung wet around her face.

“You,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“It is my ocean,” she said. “Perhaps I should be asking you what you are doing here.”

“Walking,” I huffed, turning to head back for the village.

“What’s it like?” she asked.

I stopped with a jerk, turning to look at her. “What’s what like?”

She looked away; her face taking on a rosy glow as her cheeks flushed. At one point I thought she would submerge and flee to the depths, but finally she mustered her courage. “What’s it like to walk… to… to have legs?”

The question took me by surprise. True, a mermaid was a water creature, but it never dawned on me that they would be curious of the land. Furthermore, it had slipped my mind that only Zerena had the power to grow legs.

“Why don’t you ask your friend Pan?” I grumbled. “I’m sure he’d love to tell you.”

Her expression turned hurt, causing me to regret my malice.

“Apologies,” I said. “I shouldn’t take my frustration out on you.”

She was unmoving, staring at my silently.

“As far as legs, well, I don’t know exactly,” I said, bemused. “I’ve never been anything other than myself. I suppose if I had a tail then grew legs, I would have a better chance of explaining it to you.”

She sighed, wrapping the ends of her damp hair around her finger. “Sometimes I wish I had legs.”

I furrowed my brow. “Yes, I suppose legs are something. But surely having a tail is quite a feat too. You can fly through the water, go as deep as you like. Those are things many of us land people would wish for.”

She continued to stare at me. To be honest, I wasn’t sure what I was doing trying to start up a conversation with her. Up until recently, I was terrified at the notion of mermaids. Now, not only had I saved one from dying, but another had also saved me from the same fate. The creatures made me curious.

“So…” I said, trying to think of something to keep her engaged. “I do want to thank you for saving me. I’m sure it wasn’t an easy task.”

She didn’t say a word, just nodded.

“Um, have you… have you ever been on land?” I asked. “I mean to say, have you ever come up on the beach in the sun?”

She jerked her head up, eyes big. “We can’t do that! We could get beached and be at the mercy of animals and men.” Her expression saddened. “No, we can never go on the beach.”

“Then how did you save me? I was on the…”

“That’s different,” she interrupted. “You were dying. I had to pull you to shore or you would have drowned.”

I thought about her words. “You said you can’t. But do you *want* to?”

She studied me. “It doesn’t matter. I can’t.” She turned as though she might leave.

“Wait!” I called. “I just… if you wanted to, I could watch over you.”

“Watch over me?”

“You know, as repayment,” I said, walking closer. “For saving my life. I’m in your debt, after all.”

She shook her head. “No, I cannot accept. You are a pirate and not to be trusted.”

I smiled. “Yes, but you saved me despite my being a pirate.”

“A decision I’m still weighing,” she quipped. “It may still prove to have been a mistake.”

I laughed. “Mistake or not, I suppose I will have to keep an eye out for you. I’m sure owing a favor to a mermaid is a hefty debt.”

“Indeed,” she said. A smirk played upon her lips as she looked at me. Then she dove into the water, her sparkling blue tail slapping the water behind her.

IT WAS several days later when I gathered my crew and we headed back to the ship, commencing our search for Pan.

When we returned to our ship and set sail, Zerena visited me to see how I fared.

“You almost drowned!” she cried; her face heavy with terror when I finished the tale. “I should have been there. I could have helped you.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I comforted. “If Pan hadn’t ambushed my crew and me, we would have been safely inside the inn having hot rum and a warm bed.”

She cocked an eyebrow at me.

“By warm bed, I mean to say, the inn has fireplaces. In the rooms. All of them.” I sputtered my words. “Nothing more. Just fireplaces.”

She smiled at my jittery behavior. I didn’t know why she made me nervous, it wasn’t as though I was in love with her. I enjoyed her company, to be sure, but there was nothing more to it.

“Well, I’m glad you’re back aboard the *Jolly Roger*,” she said. “It’s much easier to find you when you’re sailing.”

“How so?”

“My magic,” she said, pointing to her necklace. “It travels strongest through the water. Since I’ve been on your ship, I can now find it wherever it is in the ocean.”

Well, that’s not at all creepy or unnerving, I thought, forcing a smile. So here I was, in cahoots with a beautiful but deadly sea witch. Perhaps this plan of mine wasn’t going to work. I didn’t want to upset her, and I certainly didn’t want her hurting me.

I went across my cabin to pour myself a drink. Rum, that’s what I needed to get me through this.

“James… May I call you James?” she asked. “Jameson and Captain are so formal now that we’ve come to know one another.”

“Call me whatever you like, love,” I said, throwing back my glass.

“I have something for you,” she said. “It would help you get Pan. But it might be a bit… Well, I don’t know how you’ll feel about it.”

That got my attention. “Pan? How? What is it?”

“It’s actually a who, not a what,” she said, looking down at her hands. “And it’s best if I show you.”

“Who are you going to show me? How?” I asked, thinking I needed another drink if I was going to start using people as bait.

“Do you trust me?” she asked, holding out her hand.

I stared at her hand. I had never really trusted anyone, even my crew. Sure, I relied on them, but to say I trusted them was stretching the limits of our relationship. However, Zerena had never done me wrong. She cared about me, and more importantly, she cared about helping me get my revenge. I took her hand. “Yes.”

She took me out on the deck. It was late, only Blackburn at the helm and Elwin, my cabin boy, remained awake. Zerena led me to the railing where I had first pulled her aboard the ship.

“So the *who* is out here?” I asked.

“Take off your clothes,” she said.

“What?” I barked, eyes widened.

“Take off your jacket, your boots… whatever will help you swim better,” she said.

I shook my head, disbelieving. “No, love, it’s late. There could be sharks! You do know this is their prime feasting time. It’s the only time to make a man walk the plank.”

She laughed. “Don’t worry, my magic will protect you.” She touched her necklace.

“You do recall my recent brush with death, don’t you?” I said, only half joking. “Near drowning?”

She giggled. “Don’t be such a jellyfish, James, you’ll be fine.”

My heart raced as I weighed my options. *I could outright refuse her, risk angering her,* I thought. *At best the result would be me not getting my revenge. At worse… well… who knows what her magic could do.*

Apprehensive, I pulled off my boots and jacket, sitting them in a pile on top of a barrel. “I’ll keep the rest on, thank you.” She wasn’t going to drag me out into the dark ocean in nothing but my under trousers.

“Take my hand and we’ll jump together,” she said, extending her hand to me. “We must jump together.”

I gripped her hand tight. Our eyes met, then we took a running jump off the ship. Our hands were still locked when we hit the water. The flash of near drowning came rolling over me, but I fought it back as I reached the surface with her.

“Why did we have to jump together?” I asked, treading water.

“Because I cast a spell,” she said, her necklace glowing around her neck. “You’ll be able to breathe underwater while you’re near me.”

“Breathe underwater?” I gasped.

“See for yourself,” she said, pointing to my neck. “Carefully, they are delicate.”

I reached up and felt the thin layer of gill slits behind my ear. “Amazing. And I just breathe like normal underwater?”

“Yes.” She laughed at my excitement. “They will do the rest for you.”

I couldn’t contain my smile.

She laughed again. “Now hold on to me. I swim much faster than you can.” She splashed her tail at me.

I swam to her side, wrapping my arms around her waist. “Where are you taking me?”

She had a mischievous smirk on her face. “To the lagoon.”

WE ARRIVED in the lagoon among a cluster of rocks. My heart raced from the rush of the journey. It felt as though we flew through the water. Zipping around rock formations, past fish and sea turtles. It was the most exhilarating experience of my life.

“Are you all right?” she asked, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Aye, love. To be quite honest, that was amazing,” I said, smiling ear to ear.

Zerena’s smile faded when she looked over my shoulder. “Shh, get down.”

We hid behind a large rock. “What is it?” I asked, unsure what we were hiding from.

“Look,” she whispered, pointing to a rock in the distance.

I squinted, trying to adjust my eyes to the dusky darkness that fell over the lagoon. There was only the hint of an orange sun on the far horizon, and the moon had already begun to rise.

When my eyes acclimated to the dark, I could see what Zerena was pointing to. Sitting on top of a large rock sticking out of the lagoon was Pan. He was laughing, looking down at the water. In the pale moonlight, I could see a figure in the water at the base of the rock, but it was in the shadows.

“Race me,” Pan said, laughing.

“It’s not fair,” the young woman’s voice replied. “Flying and swimming are very different.” She splashed her tail, spraying him with water. “Anyway, you cheat.”

“No, I don’t,” Pan barked, crossing his arms.

“Oh, come on, don’t be sour,” she said, backstroking through the water around the rock. “I was only kidding.”

I squinted harder, trying to get a good look at both of them, but it was too dark. Farther in the distance, several other mermaids jumped and splashed in the water. They appeared to be getting closer.

“So this is your plan?” I whispered to Zerena. “You want to bring me into mermaid-infested waters so they can tear me limb from limb?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she whispered, placing a finger over her lips to hush me. “They don’t even know we’re here. Besides, I wouldn’t let anything happen to you.”

“Then what is your plan?” I asked, trying to remain hidden behind the rock while my toes pruned in the salty water.

“That little mermaid is one of Pan’s best friends,” Zerena explained. “He spends nearly every day in the lagoon playing with her and the others.”

The pieces started to fit together. “You think I should do something to her?”

She nodded.

“I’m not exactly equipped for stealing a mermaid,” I whispered. “I don’t even know the first thing about trapping one.”

“Leave that to me,” she said. “I can help you capture her.”

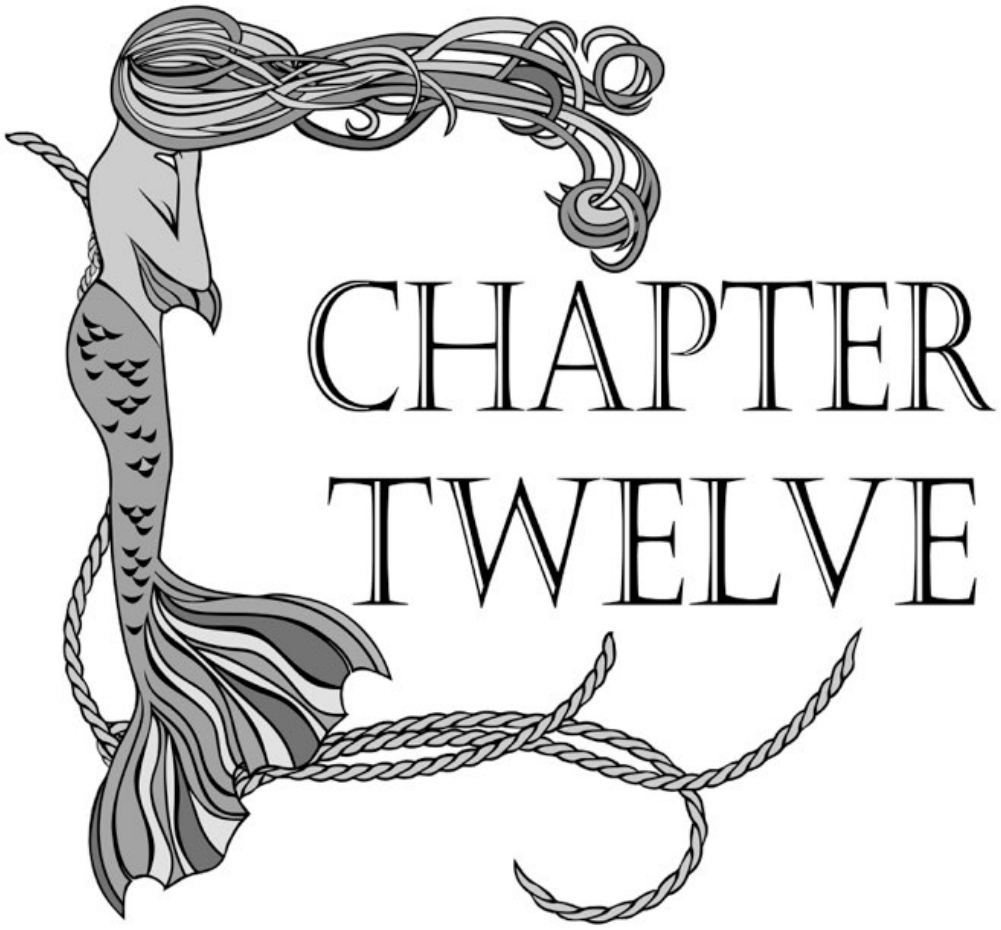
“Why?” I looked into Zerena’s eyes as the moon reflected in them. “Why would you risk your own safety and potentially hurt one of your own? Doesn’t it go against everything you believe in? Wouldn’t that make me exactly what your people think I am?”

“She won’t be harmed,” Zerena murmured. “Just held for a bit. Besides, I want to help you.”

I took Zerena’s hand in my own. “Thank you. I’ve never had anyone I felt I could really rely on.”

“Me neither,” she said, smiling.

For the first time since I met Zerena, I felt I could actually see a future with her. And it scared the hell out of me.



A COUPLE DAYS LATER, IT WAS TIME TO CAPTURE A LITTLE MERMAID.

Zerena informed me mermaids were particularly curious of human objects. Baubles and everyday items to a man like me were considered treasures and unique in their world. Obsession with treasure was something I could relate to.

I found a small wood box and filled it with odds and ends, like my old compass, along with the broken pocket watch I had used to capture Tinker Bell. I made sure the metal of the utensils and brass cherub figurine I stuffed inside had been polished to shining. After all, I'd found treasure had more appeal when it sparkled.

I stowed the box under one arm and went out on deck where Zerena waited for me.

“Are you all set?” she asked, eyeing the box.

I opened the top, holding it out for her to get a good look. “Treasure enough for you?”

She smirked. “Yes, that will do perfectly.”

I closed the latch on the box and shoved it into a leather satchel. “What about you? Are you ready?”

She nodded with a smile. “Come see for yourself.”

I followed her below deck to the brig. At the very end of a line of iron-barred cells sat a large, rectangular cage. It loosely resembled a bathtub. Longer than it was tall, it was made of iron to strengthen the bottom, corners and curves of the edges, while the walls of it were lined with crystal-clear glass so a person could see through it. It was filled three quarters of the way high with water.

“What in blazes is this?” I asked, running the tip of my finger along the wall of thick glass.

“A cage,” Zerena said. “A cage fit for a mermaid, to be exact. I have spelled it to provide her with the proper amount of air, since she won’t be able to swim around. I’ve also made it so you or I are the only two who can open it.”

I had to admit it felt a bit eerie listening to her speak as though she took a touch of pleasure in the process. “Don’t trust my men, do you?”

“I don’t want there to be any loose ends,” she said, smiling and placing a hand on my arm. “I want you to be able to get your revenge on Pan. Her capture is the surest method.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I said apprehensively.

“Good,” she said. “Then it’s time to lay the trap. The sooner we capture her, the sooner we get the boy and are able to free her.” She looked up into my eyes. “I take no pleasure in hurting one of my own.”

I nodded. I knew she was right. The mermaid was the best chance of capturing Pan, but it felt wrong. I didn’t hurt innocent girls—mermaids—

whatever she was. But my anger and thirst for revenge were stronger than my conscience. “Let’s go catch a mermaid.”

ZERENA USED her spell to give me the ability to breathe underwater again so we could travel to the Mermaid Lagoon and set the trap.

The plan was to catch the mermaid underwater. A trap at the surface would be too hard. Mermaids were observant and very leery out in the open. Beneath the surface they felt at ease and in their element.

We picked an area of the lagoon Zerena said the mermaid frequented. It was filled with boats and ships that had been taken down by the mermaids during the years.

As I stared at the boat boneyard, my gut twisted hard. *All those souls lost,* I thought. I hadn’t realized how true the stories were. An image of my beloved *Jolly Roger* sinking beneath the waves flashed in my mind. I shook my head, willing away the gruesome picture.

Zerena and I placed the treasure box in the center of a net we laid out to look like part of the old wreckage. In reality, we rigged the net so it could be pulled to capture the young mermaid.

I wasn’t sure how we would get her to the ship and in her cage once we netted her, but Zerena insisted she could subdue the little mermaid once she was close enough.

It turned into a waiting game. We hid in some of the old wreckage, the rope to let loose the trap tight in my hand. I breathed underwater, the action still so foreign to me; I found myself holding my breath out of instinct.

We waited a good hour before I caught sight of a mermaid flittering under the water. She had a beautiful blue tail and light auburn hair that

flowed behind her. *The one who saved me,* I thought. *What is she doing here?* I tried to talk to Zerena, but gills or not, my voice wouldn't come under the pressure of the water.

The mermaid neared the trap, eyeing the box.

Zerena placed a hand on my arm and pointed to the auburn-haired beauty. I shook my head, trying to signal this was the wrong mermaid. Zerena simply nodded and pointed to the rope I was holding.

I looked up again. The little mermaid was floating several feet above the chest, looking about as though she felt she was being watched.

I looked at Zerena, shaking my head again. Her brow furrowed, her confusion evident. She pointed frantically to where the chest lay. When I looked, the little mermaid was digging through it.

I hesitated. I wanted my revenge, but this mermaid had not only caused me no harm, she saved my life. This couldn't be the right course of action. There had to be a more honorable way of catching Pan.

Before I could communicate my desire to abandon the plan, Zerena reached over me, grabbed the rope from my hand and pulled. The net encircled the mermaid and her little treasure chest. She panicked when the heavy ropes closed in around her. She struggled against it to no avail. Bubbles created by her tail thrashes made it hard to see what was going on. I was frozen in place, unsure what I should do.

Zerena moved quickly. She plucked a shell from her dome necklace and swam to the little mermaid. In the confusion and struggle, the mermaid didn't see Zerena swim over her and drop the tiny shell on her head. Quickly, the mermaid stopped moving and went quiet, still held in the confines of the net.

Zerena motioned for me to join her. I knew there was no point in trying to back out of the plan now that the little mermaid lay motionless in the tangled net. With my help, Zerena and I swam, with the unconscious mermaid in tow, back to my ship.

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the ship, the men helped hoist us aboard. I wanted to confront Zerena but didn't want to make a scene in front of the men. So, while Zerena dried, I carried the little mermaid below deck to the brig.

I tried my best to handle her gently as I slid her down into the water-filled tank. I stared at her after I shut the lid. She looked lifeless floating in the water. *This isn't right*, I thought. *Nothing about this seems right.*

"Well, there you go," said Zerena, walking up behind me. "You've captured yourself a little mermaid."

"This is the mermaid who is friends with Pan?" I asked, jaw clenched.

"Yes."

"Well, she happens to also be the mermaid who saved my life the night of the storm," I said. "I had no clue they were one in the same. She doesn't deserve this."

"She'll be fine," Zerena said, placing her hand on my shoulder and turning me to face her. "She won't come to any harm, and she will help you capture Pan."

Guilt panged in my chest. Something about all of it felt off, menacing.

"Trust me," Zerena pleaded. "The glass coffin will keep her safe."

"Glass coffin?" I barked, eyes wide.

"That's what I call it," she mused. "Not a literal coffin, but I suppose the name fits when applied to a mermaid."

I had heard of glass coffins. There was rumor an evil queen from the realm of Fairest used a sleeping spell and a glass coffin to keep a princess under her control. This type of thing felt like dark magic.

"Are you sure this is safe?" I asked. "It's just—"

"She'll be fine and back with her people in no time," Zerena said, leaning in and kissing me on the lips. "I promise, James. You have to trust

me.”

I thought I could. I had come to feel as though she was the only one I could trust. But now, seeing this poor, innocent mermaid floating helplessly in a glass prison, I saw Zerena in a new light.

Zerena reached over, placing a hand on the glass. With her other hand, she grasped the necklace around her neck. Both the necklace and the glass coffin began to glow, pulsing like a heartbeat. After several more moments, she stopped and all went still again.

“She will be out for some time,” Zerena said.

“But she can breathe?” I asked, leaning in to look through the glass. “You’re certain?”

“Yes,” she assured. “Think of it as a long nap.”

A sleeping curse is what it sounds like, I thought.

“I would keep your men away from her,” Zerena urged. “You, too, should stay away whenever possible.”

“What harm is she if she’s asleep?” I asked.

“I don’t know how long my spell will hold, to be honest,” she said, biting her lip. “It’s best if she knows as little about us as possible.”

I furrowed my brow, confused by Zerena’s sudden need to keep me away from the mermaid.

“It’s just, after we release her, I don’t want her going back to Atlantis and spreading tales about us,” she said. “Neptune might use it as an excuse to retaliate.”

I nodded. She had a point there. I had no desire for Neptune to even know I existed. Anonymity was my aspiration when it came to the god of the seas.

I SENT THE MEN INLAND FOR A LITTLE FUN AT THE TAVERN WHILE I protected my leverage against Pan. Not that I needed to worry about her escaping. Zerena spelled the mermaid's cage to only be opened by herself or me, but it still made me feel better knowing I was close by.

Zerena set off to prepare a trap for Pan. Her plan was to use the mermaid as bait and lure Pan to Crocodile Beach. The place was teeming with crocs. I wasn't sure how she managed for us to survive, let alone anyone else. She assured me that with her magic she would be able to control the creatures.

I went to the galley to find something to eat. Kidnapping mermaids was exhausting and caused quite the appetite. I managed to scrounge up some cheese, bread and dried dates.

“Ah, a feast fit for a king,” I mumbled to myself.

I headed back to my quarters with the bounty, but instead of turning to go up on deck, I felt the overwhelming urge to head farther below toward the brig.

I made my way through the dank corridors, past the cells to the mermaid’s tank.

She was awake, staring at me with big, beautiful blue eyes. She shrank to the back of the tank, fear laced in her expression.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured.

“Why have you done this?” she asked, her voice an echo as it bounced off the glass.

“It’s nothing personal, love,” I said, trying to justify my actions. “I won’t let you be harmed. I just need to… borrow you… for a while.”

“Borrow me!” she screeched. “I’m not some shell you can pluck from the ocean whenever you have need of me!”

She was right, and I knew it. However, my desire for vengeance was so strong, I didn’t care anymore. It wasn’t like I could undo what I’d done. I would get my revenge on Pan and then I would release her.

“Why?” she pleaded. “What could possibly be so important it could make you think this is right?”

“I need to get to Pan,” I said.

“Pan?” she asked. “You dragged me from the ocean because of Peter?”

“He’s your friend. He cares for you,” I explained. “He’ll come to save you and I’ll kill him when he does.”

“You’re using me as… as bait?” she hissed. “He’s a boy! You’re barbaric.”

“It’s the way of the world, lass,” I barked. “Your beloved Pan steals boys from their homes, from their weeping mothers’ arms!”

“He wouldn’t. He doesn’t,” she defended halfheartedly.

“I suppose there’s nothing more to say,” I said, turning on my heel to leave. “Your feelings for the boy have blinded you to what he really is.”

“Then I did make a mistake,” she cried. “I saved you; I shouldn’t have.”

I stopped in my tracks, turning to look at her. “No one asked you to save me. You’re the one who made the bloody mistake of rescuing a man you didn’t know. That’s your mistake; it’s not on me.”

“So you lack honor then?” she spat, pounded against the tank as though she wanted to dig her nails into it. “No true gentleman would treat me in such a way.”

“Well, I’m sure a gentleman wouldn’t.” I laughed dryly. “But I never confessed to being one, and I never will.”

“My father was right.” She sobbed; hands pressed against the glass. “People up here are evil. They only care about destruction.”

“Pan destroyed my life!” I shouted. “Your friend, the one you care so much about, he is the reason you are here.”

My tone took her aback and she shrank away, her hair flowing around her, creating a halo.

“Look.” I sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t come down here to cause you pain. I merely wanted to see what it is you would like to eat. I’m not a total brute.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said, crossing her arms.

I held out the tray of food. “Are you sure? I doubt they have much cheese and bread where you’re from.”

She eyed the tray but remained silent.

“Now that I think of it, perhaps you don’t even eat food… not real food,” I said. “What do you usually have for dinner? A nice slimy kelp salad? Raw fish?” I rubbed my stubbled beard, thinking. “No, I suppose fish is too personal for you?”

She rolled her eyes.

I moved the tray from side to side. “Are you sure you wouldn’t want to try a bite or two? I’m sure it would be the talk of the reef to be able to say you had cheese, bread and figs.”

She huffed. “Aren’t you worried I’ll escape?”

I shrugged, setting the tray on the top of a nearby barrel. “You can’t escape.” I patted the tank. “Magic.”

“So you have a witch working for you,” she said, a look of disgust on her face. “I should have known.”

“It’s only a temporary situation,” I said. “Once I kill Pan, I’ll set you free and be done with Neverland for good.”

“Why would you want to kill him?” she asked. “He’s just a boy. Sure, he can be...”

“A pain in the rear?” I chimed in.

The corner of her mouth came up in the slightest grin but quickly straightened into a frown. “Yes, I guess that’s a good assessment. But anyway, it’s still no reason to kill the boy.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” I said.

“I will never understand why one man wants to kill another,” she murmured.

My breath caught in my throat. The words were so innocent, so pure. We were born without faults or sins, but it was our actions that made us the monsters we became as adults. Looking at her was having to face the monster I had become.

“I…” I started, having difficulty putting it into words. “I had a son. He died… Pan.” I sucked in air. “Pan is the reason he was killed.”

Her eyes grew wide. “How do you mean?”

I leaned against a beam between two cells. “He was twelve. I’d only known of him for about a year, but in the year I had grown to love him more than anything in the world.”

She leaned in closer to the glass, listening.

“I got word from his mother that he’d gone missing,” I continued. “When I started asking some of his friends, they told me he had met a boy who could fly. A boy who called himself Peter Pan. The rumor was, Pan would pick boys without fathers, becoming a father to them himself.”

The mermaid stared at me, her mouth open.

“It didn’t take me long to find out where Pan was,” I spat. “I only had to follow the trail of missing sons.”

The mermaid placed her hands against the glass. “So his Lost Boys… they’re…”

“They are the kidnapped sons of mothers all over,” I said. “He takes them in the middle of the night, while their mothers sleep, and lures them into his *army*.”

She seemed confused, as if she was trying to put the pieces of a puzzle together. “But the boys… I know them; they make no mention of families.”

“You know them? Perhaps you met my son!” I said, sitting up straight. “Owen. Did you meet a boy named Owen?”

Her mouth fell open again. She placed her hand against her chest. “Yes, I know Owen.” She hung her head low. “I mean, I knew him.”

My heart sank. I didn’t know why I felt hope in thinking she knew him. Perhaps to bring him back to me for a brief moment, but it didn’t change the fact that he was gone.

“And did he… was he happy?” I asked. “Until he died, was he content to live in Neverland?”

She nodded her head. “Yes, I believe he was very happy here. He was always smiling, laughing. He had such a beautiful smile.”

“Were you friends?” I asked.

“Yes, I would say we were,” she answered. “I saved him from drowning once.”

A bark of laughter escaped me. “It would appear you’re rather good at that.”

She smiled.

“And when he died. They say he was struck down by another pirate,” I said, my tone turning somber. “Do you know anything about it?”

“No,” she said. “I just know Peter and his Lost Boys were defending the lagoon from a ship full of men who had come in to try to catch a mermaid. I heard word of a dark fairy who needed mermaid scales for a spell. He and the Lost Boys made it their duty to force the ship out of Neverland.”

“They were hunting your people?”

She nodded softly, looking into her hands. “We lost several mermaids before Peter and the boys finally succeeded.”

“And it would appear he lost at least one boy as well,” I said through clenched teeth.

“I’m truly sorry,” she said, staring through the glass at me. “Your son was a hero, and he loved being here. That much is true.”

Her words warmed me. To speak with her of Owen made him feel alive again.

I stepped over to the tray. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like something to eat? I don’t mind sharing.”

She smiled. “I suppose it would be nice to try new food.”

Placing my hands on the lid of the spelled tank, I raised it half a foot so she could reach through. I handed her bread, cheese and dates. She took each, one at a time, tasting and savoring them.

It was fascinating, watching someone taste food for the first time. The wonder and pure enjoyment on her face was intoxicating.

“So how do you like pirate food?” I asked, a wry smile on my face.

“It’s wonderful, Captain,” she responded, taking another date.

“Call me James,” I said. “And you… I don’t know your name.”

“Elynna,” she said, covering her mouth as she swallowed the fruit. “My name is Elynna.”

THE NEXT MORNING, I TOOK ELYNNA A PLATTER OF GRAPES, CHERRIES, AND oatmeal. She ate them happily while we talked. I told her of my various adventures, while she spoke of her sisters and how she loved to venture out of the lagoon and discover new places.

"Have you ever considered leaving the lagoon?" I asked, handing her some grapes.

"All mermaids think about it," she said. "But lagoon means safety…" She rose an eyebrow at me. "At least for the most part."

I blushed. "Again, my dear, I truly am sorry."

"You do know I'm not going to let you hurt Peter," she said matter-of-factly. "I will do everything in my power to fight you."

I sighed, setting the tray of food down on a barrel. “I know. And to be honest… well… never mind.”

“What?” she asked, pressing herself against the glass.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. It’s just, since I have had time to think this whole thing over, it feels wrong.”

“That’s because it is wrong!” she cried, not holding back her emotions. “Everything about this is wrong. Whoever this witch is, she is using your pain, your anger, to blind you to this.”

“No!” I barked. “She wants me to have revenge to help heal my pain. She cares about me. Bloody hell, she even cares about you! Wants to make sure you’re not hurt during all this.”

“Are you really so ignorant?” Elynna insulted. “You can’t tell me you haven’t felt off about this situation from the beginning.”

“I… it’s just...” I wanted to disagree with her, but the truth was staring me in the face. And it made me furious. I kicked the barrel holding the tray of food, causing everything to tumble to the ground. I slammed the lid of the glass coffin down and turned on my heel.

“This is not the way to honor Owen,” she called. “Be the man he was proud of.”

I clenched my teeth and headed to my quarters.

By dinner, when I was preparing her evening meal, I had almost given up on my vengeance with Pan. For the first time in a year, I was at ease and felt like revenge wasn’t the only way to heal my heart.

I felt guilty for my earlier confrontation with Elynna. I knew she was right about all of it. I decided to bring her some food and then I would release her. I would explain to Zerena that the plan was not going to work.

I thought Elynna's last meal aboard the ship should be special, so I grabbed some salted pork, peas and a couple biscuits for her to try. I smiled to myself. *I doubt they have many biscuits where she's from,* I thought, laughing at the idea of soggy biscuits. When I turned to head for the brig, I came face to face with Zerena.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Um…" I looked down at my tray. "Making myself some dinner. What does it look like? And where have you been?"

She smiled, taking a biscuit. "A well laid-plan requires time and patience."

"Two things I am in short supply of, I'm afraid," I said, putting down the tray.

"Well, wait no more, the time has come. Tomorrow morning we'll take the little mermaid to Crocodile Beach and you'll finally have your revenge."

I felt as though I should be happy at the news. Hadn't this whole situation come from me wanting to kill Pan for taking Owen and getting him killed? But now that I had gotten to know Elynna, I knew I wouldn't be able to do it. I had to gather my strength and tell Zerena.

Zerena looked me over. "Are you feeling well? You don't seem yourself."

I nodded. "Just tired, I guess. I haven't slept much while guarding her down below."

She ran a finger along my cheek. "Get yourself something to eat and go lay down. I'll watch her for a few hours while you rest."

"Oh, that's really not necessary," I said. "I actually was going to—"

"Nonsense," she said. "I won't hear another word of it. Eat your food and lay down for a spell. We can talk once you're rested."

I finally conceded, deciding that if Zerena took a little time down in the brig with Elynna, she would see what a sweet mermaid she really was

and would agree with me about releasing her. I went to my quarters while Zerena headed below deck.

I sat at my desk, picking at the food as I thought of Elynna. *What if Zerena doesn't see her the way I do?* I thought. *Surely, she must. I will tell Zerena to forget about it. Elynna is right; I don't have to do this.*

I grabbed the tray of food. I would take it to Elynna and let Zerena get to know her. Certainly, once she spent a little time with Elynna, she would see the little mermaid didn't deserve to be held captive. Especially if I was telling her I wanted to release the girl.

The ship creaked and swayed as I made my way down to the brig. The waves had begun to pick up, giving the *Jolly Roger* a natural rhythm that most sailors went to sleep with. Muffled by the sounds, my footsteps went unnoticed.

I was about to the round the corner to the brig when I heard Elynna's voice. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"You know perfectly well why it has come to this, Elynna," Zerena said. "Your father brought this on you."

Father? I thought.

"You disobeyed the law and got punished," Elynna sobbed. "He gave you so many chances, Aunt Zerena."

"He is an unworthy king!" Zerena snapped.

The pieces fell into place. *Elynna is Neptune's daughter,* I thought. *What have I done?*

"He is the rightful ruler of Atlantis, and you tried to usurp him!" Elynna shouted. "Atlantis would be destroyed under your rule. You only care about power, never considering the cost."

"No matter!" Zerena laughed. "Soon, you won't be around to see it."

Elynna sobbed. "Don't do this, Aunt Zerena. You weren't always this way. You can change. Go to Father; plead with him. Prove to him you can change."

“I don’t need to change,” Zerena spat. “I’m happy as I am. I will be even happier when that pitiful brother of mine is gone and I sit on the throne.”

“And James?” Elynna asked. “How does he play into all this?”

“You know exactly why I needed him,” Zerena hissed. “Your beloved father made it impossible for me to lay a finger on you—literally. James was the one who set the trap. The one who dragged you on the ship. He was even the one who dropped you into this cage!”

“When my father—”

“Your father has no power here.” The sea witch laughed, tapping the glass. “This spell has removed dear old Daddy’s protection. Nothing can keep me from you now.”

“James will!” Elynna cried.

“Oh please.” Zerena cackled. “He’s like sand in my fingers. Just add a bit of water and I can mold and make him into what I desire.”

“You’re taking advantage of him,” Elynna continued. “He lost his son, his little boy. He’s grieving and you’re taking advantage of him.”

“Consider it a mutually beneficial alliance, my little string ray,” Zerena said. “We use you to trap Pan, and I get rid of you in the process. I really don’t see a negative in this situation, my dear.”

“You’re a monster!” Elynna cried. “And what of James? What will become of him when he realizes you are an evil sea hag?”

“He will have two choices,” Zerena said. “He can join me and we can rule the seas together. Or he can die like his son.”

“You wouldn’t,” Elynna hissed, slamming her fists on the tank walls.

“I don’t want to hurt him; I actually rather enjoy him,” Zerena said. “He’s handsome enough and a heck of sailor. But if he gets in the way of me taking Atlantis, I’ll have no choice but to kill him.”

“You’ve made him think you care for him,” she accused.

“I do. Well, at least I think I do,” Zerena said. “Come to think of it, I would say that I actually would be sad to see him die.” She laughed. “Isn’t that funny? What do you think, my dear niece? Can you see Captain Jameson Shaw as your uncle?” She laughed harder.

“He’s a good man, Zerena,” Elynna said. “He’ll never go along with this. When he discovers your plans, he will try to stop you.”

“He was happy enough to kidnap you if it meant he could kill Peter Pan,” Zerena mocked. “He’s a pirate, after all. I doubt he’ll have too many reservations about some necessary bloodshed in order to take over a kingdom. He’d become king consort of Atlantis, you silly girl. That’s a title most men would kill their own mothers for.”

“No,” Elynna wept. “You’re wrong. He won’t do it.”

Zerena laughed. “You live in your own little world where you rescue drowning sailors and think they will choose the side of good. Even your own father has told you pirates are bad. What…” She continued to ramble.

I eased backward as the ship continued to sway. I had lingered too long and feared being discovered. My only chance was to retreat to my quarters, unnoticed, and act oblivious to Zerena’s real intensions.

I reached the top of the stairs and exhaled the breath I had been holding. The next step I took caused a loud creak. My heart jumped. *Please let her think it was the ship,* I thought. I listened and could no longer hear the two women talking. *I’ve been caught.* My heart raced so loudly I could hear it. Then I heard Zerena’s voice again. She sounded as though she were still at Elynna’s tank. I sighed with relief.

My heart didn’t stop drumming until I reached the sanctuary of my quarters. However, I knew I was only halfway to safety. If I acted the slightest bit off when she saw me, Zerena might suspect I was on to her plan.

I took the tray of food I had been carrying and pushed it around a bit, to appear I had munched on it. Then I threw myself down on my bed and

pretended to rest.

Quite some time had passed when Zerena quietly sneaked into the room. She walked over to the fire and stoked it, creating a warm glow against the dim walls. She warmed her hands over it, a smile playing across her face. She came and sat on the edge of my bed, leaning to kiss me.

My eyes flew open in shock. She had kissed me before, but I hadn't known she was a murderous usurper then.

"I'm sorry I woke you," she said.

I sat up in the bed. "No need to apologize. I didn't want to sleep long anyway."

"Anxious for your revenge?" she asked, a smile playing on her lips.

Anxious to get you off my ship. "Aye, I'm ready for this to be over."

"The trap is all set," she said, running a finger along my scruffy jaw. "We need only her in it as the bait."

"And… and you promise she won't be hurt?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Of course not," Zerena said. "I told you, I take no joy from causing the young mermaid distress. She will be perfectly safe. Once it's all done, we will return her to her family, unharmed."

I bet we will.

"So, are you ready to take her to the trap now?" Zerena asked, eager.

"Now?" I hesitated. If I didn't act anxious to get my revenge, she would know. But I had to buy time. "Let's wait until morning."

"Morning?" Zerena spat, standing up and facing me. "Why do you want to wait until morning?"

"My men. They're at the tavern inland," I said.

"Then call them back in," Zerena ordered, appearing irritated and flustered. "You're their captain; they have to obey you."

“Yes, and I will. It’s just, they will be drunk. They’ve been at the tavern for quite a while now. It will take them the night to sleep it off.” I was struggling to sound sure of myself. “I don’t want my crew going in there with anything but their best. This must go off perfectly. I will have my revenge, and I won’t have it botched up again.”

She relaxed, giving a deep sigh. “You’re right. We can’t afford for anything to go wrong.”

I sighed myself. I had bought ten hours, tops. And if I couldn’t get her to leave for the night, I would be in the same spot I was now.

“What of the trap?” I asked. “Shouldn’t one of us also be guarding it?”

She turned her mouth, thinking. “I suppose you’re right. If Pan were to discover it prematurely, he could destroy it. Perhaps you should go. I can stay here with the mermaid.”

“Me? But I… I don’t know where you placed the trap. I mean, not really,” I said, scrambling for an excuse. “Besides, I don’t leave my ship and crew.” I smiled, reaching for her hand, kissing it. “I don’t trust them with a rare flower like you.”

She cocked an eyebrow at me. “A rare flower? Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t we? I wasn’t hatched yesterday, James.”

I knew I had pushed too far in my hurry to get her off the ship. She was on to me.

“What are you up to, James?” She glared daggers at me.

This was it. I knew I had one chance to charm her completely or both Elynna and I were done for.

“I-I’m sorry. You’ve caught me,” I murmured, standing. “I didn’t want you to find out. Not this way.”

She backed away, nervous and angry. “What is it? What have you done?”

“Zerena, after this is all over, I was going to ask you to come away with me,” I rasped, attempting my most sultry voice.

She started, taken aback by the news. “You want me to—”

“To be with me,” I said. “Join my crew.” I reached out, cupping her cheek. “More importantly, I want you to join me.”

I leaned in, pressing my lips tenderly against hers. She relaxed, wrapping her arms around my neck and leaning into the kiss.

When we finally parted, she smiled. “You want to be with me? Really?”

“Aye,” I said. “That’s why I was pushing for you to go. I need to inform my crew. But they need to be sober or they’ll never remember.”

She smiled, blushing. “If you insist, James. I will keep watch on the trap and then come for you at sunrise. Be sure your men are sober and ready.”

“I’ll go right now and call them in,” I said, walking toward my chamber door.

Zerena followed me out on deck. I headed for the gangplank while she followed.

“You should go,” I urged. “Before it gets dark.”

“Don’t tell me you’re worried for me, Captain,” she flirted, taking my hand.

I swallowed hard. “Of course I’ve come to care for you, Zerena. I have trusted you with my greatest sorrows. My secrets. My life. I don’t do that for just anyone.”

I studied her face, looking for a hint of emotion that might tell me Zerena was not completely evil. Deep down, I knew I wanted to be wrong about her. She had become my confidante, my friend.

“That’s lovely, James.” She smiled, but it didn’t touch her eyes. I wondered if she had been putting on an act the entire time, pretending to be the damsel while she was really the evil sea witch.

“Well, I must go,” I said, bowing to her. “Until sunrise, my dear.”

I took off down the dock, thinking I had escaped her when I heard her call out. “James!”

I turned to face her.

“I wanted to warn you. It would be best if you and your men didn’t spend any time with that mermaid,” Zerena said. “She’s liable to spin lies to play on your emotions to free her.”

I clenched my teeth. “Aye, my lady. I’ll be sure none of us are fooled by the lies of a mermaid.”

I MANAGED TO GET WORD TO MR. SMEE, INSTRUCTING HIM TO RETURN THE men to the ship immediately. I then ran down to the brig to find Elynna crying in her tank.

"Did she hurt you?" I asked, walking toward her.

"Not yet," Elynna whimpered. "You know she's just playing you. She __"

"I know," I interrupted. "I heard everything. Well, at least nearly everything. I headed back up on deck before she could discover me, but I got the general idea."

She appeared relieved. "Then you know she's not helping you at all? She's using my death to help her take Atlantis."

"Yes, I heard that," I confirmed.

“Then you know I’m—”

“Neptune’s daughter?” I asked. “Yes, it didn’t take long to put the pieces together.”

I heaved the lid of the glass tank open. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

“You’re freeing me?”

“Yes,” I said. “You have to get out of here before she returns at sunrise.”

“But she’ll know you helped me,” she said, panicked. “Only you or she can open the tank.”

“Let me worry about her,” I said, reaching my hand out. “You have to return to your kingdom; warn King Neptune. Maybe he can help stop her before she reaches me.”

Elynna put her tiny hand timidly in mine. Pulling her to me, I lifted her into my arms, water dripping down my jacket onto my boots.

She wrapped her arms around my neck. “What about your revenge?”

“My revenge is not worth your life. I’ll find another way.”

I carried her up on deck. I found it difficult, as her scales made it hard to keep a grip on her. I was sure, to some, it would have been quite comical.

I sat her down on the deck next to the rail. “Off with you now, before my men return.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“Do you really want me to take you back down below deck?” I spat. The words came out harsher than I had meant them. My nerves were starting to get the better of me.

“Of course not,” she said. “But I want to know why you’re helping me after going to so much trouble to capture me.”

“I heard what the witch said,” I said. “The only reason she’s helping me is so she can hurt you, so she can take Atlantis from your father.”

“But it gets you the revenge you seek,” she said.

“Not at the expense of others,” I said, looking at the setting sun.

There were several moments of silence. I actually had to look down to make sure she hadn’t left already.

“What is it?” I asked. She was staring at me intently.

“I was right to save you,” she said with a smile. “I was right about you.”

“Oh really? And what exactly were you right about?” I asked smugly.

“That you’re a good man,” she said. “You’re one of the good ones.”

She reached her hands out to me and I took them, pulling her up into my arms. She stared at me with those big blue eyes, as though she could see every memory I had.

“Don’t ever let anyone tell you otherwise,” she said. “You’re a good man, James.”

She leaned in and pressed her lips against mine. It felt like a bolt of lightning shot through my body. Suddenly, all my senses were heightened. The air smelled cleaner, her lips tasted sweet, my flesh was glowing warm where it touched hers. I had never experienced anything like it.

My heart ached. It felt as though I suffered through sorrow, pain and joy all at the same time.

When we parted, I stared into her eyes. “Did you…?”

“Feel that?” she asked. “Yes.”

“What was that?” I asked.

“I-I have no idea,” she said. “Unless…”

“Unless what?” I asked.

“I have to talk to my father first,” she said. “He will know.”

“Know what?” I asked, my arms still wrapped around her.

“Ahoy, Captain,” I heard from behind me.

I turned to see my crew headed up the dock.

“Please, you must let me go,” she said, struggling against me. “I must go to my father.”

“But how will I find you again?” I asked, feeling as though I would die if I didn’t see her again. She pushed off me and dove into the water. I leaned over the rail, feeling my heart splitting. *This is insanity,* I thought. I had never felt a pull from a woman before.

My eyes searched the water. She surfaced briefly, a smile on her face. “You don’t need to find me. I’ll find you.”

With that, she dove back under the gentle waves.

When my crew arrived, I went to work sobering them up and briefing them on the situation with the sea witch.

The plan was to trap the sea witch in the rope we had rescued her from. As far as we knew, it was still spelled and would be able to hold her, even if I had cut a few strands. I put my cabin boy on repairing the cuts, hoping it would reinstate the magic Neptune had placed on it.

We set to work, placing the net under a rug in my quarters. With a carefully placed trigger system, the moment I pulled the rope hidden behind a wall tapestry by the door, the net would swallow her, rug and all.

I had sent most of my crew to bed to sleep off their hangovers so they would be ready by sunrise. The few remaining out on deck dozed at their posts.

I knew I needed to rest, but my heart would not stop racing and my mind could not quiet. I continued to think about my revenge on Pan, Zerena's betrayal, the kiss with Elynna. They all confused me.

When I was with Elynna, I felt I could live without my revenge. When I was with Zerena, my revenge was all I could think about. And I knew she had betrayed me and planned to kill me if I didn't go along with her plan. By freeing Elynna, I pretty much declared I was not in agreement with her plan. Now it was either her or me, and I wasn't planning on going down any time soon.

The urge to sleep finally won out, because that night, I dreamed of Elynna.

THE WAVES WERE CRASHING down on me again as I struggled helplessly for the surface. The rope tangled around me, dragging me to the dark depths of the ocean. Then, as the burn for air clawed at my lungs, the beautiful little mermaid glided through the water to me. Her soft auburn hair swirled around her head like the halo of an angel. Her compassionate eyes, blue like the sky, looked at me with surprise.

She reached for me, grabbing the collar of my jacket and pulling me to her. She pressed her lips to mine. What first felt like the final kiss of my existence turned into life renewed as the agony of drowning slipped away. She blew air into my lungs, relieving the burn and bringing clarity to my mind. Tiny bubbles traveled between us as some of the air escaped our lips.

She went to work untangling the ropes holding me captive. We were dragged farther and farther toward the ocean floor. She paused several

times to offer me new air. Blackness surrounded us. My only clue that she was still there was the touch of her hands as she worked the twisted rope.

Suddenly, I was free. Her dainty hand took mine. She led me farther into the belly of the ocean, yet I no longer felt the strain to breathe air. It felt as though we traveled through the darkness for hours. Then, a soft glow of light finally came into view. We swam deeper, the light growing larger and brighter.

It was a city, bright with light and alive with movement. Atlantis. Mermaids and mermen swam in and out of buildings, played in the coral beds, and conversed. It was the most amazing sight I had ever seen.

The castle towered over the buildings below. Glowing bright gold against the dark water, it gave off a soft green cast.

Elynna pulled me through the obstacle of buildings, around the castle, past the coral beds and beyond the outskirts of the fair kingdom. The warm glow of the city began to fall away and darkness engulfed us again.

Then the temperature of the water changed. What was once warm sent a cold chill to my bones. I shivered. My fingers and toes lost feeling. I tried to talk. *Where are we going?* I wanted to say, but Elynna continued forward.

Ahead of us, the water began to glow again. This time it was an eerie red, resembling blood in the water. Elynna slowed, cautiously coming up on a cave. We swam closer, the red glow radiating from the cave itself. As we came upon the mouth of the cave, I could see it wasn’t a cave at all. It was piles and piles of bones, of man and creature alike. They had been laid together, secured with rope, clay and God knows what other ghastly materials.

The ground around the cave, which appeared at first to be covered in large bits of coral and seaweed, was actually overflowing with ghostly grotesque creatures that appeared to be part anemone and part man. Among the creatures lay skeletons of men and sea creatures having

ventured too close. Their long fingers reached toward us, threatening to pull us into their graveyard of bones and death.

I pulled away from Elynna, urging her to turn back, but she kept dragging me forward to the mouth of the lair.

Staying away from the creatures below, we ventured into the hungry jaws of the skeleton cave. I could hear a faint voice coming from deep inside. We glided down a long, dark tunnel, coming to a stop just before it opened up into a round cavern.

The ground was littered with bones and broken jars filled with strange substances that oozed and mixed together. The walls of the room were high. Large crevices were torn out of the walls, making shelves to house more jars, boxes and scrolls.

I hugged the wall of the tunnel, taking a chance to lean forward and peer farther into the lair. In the center of the room, the floor was higher and housed a large pot that bubbled and steamed.

I looked to Elynna, my brow furrowed in question. She pressed her index finger over her lips, shaking her head. She leaned forward and pointed beyond the boiling cauldron.

In the corner, with her back to us, was a tall mermaid. Her tail was black, like wet coals. Down her back flowed a mass of unkempt hair. At least, I thought it was hair, though it resembled slimy black worms that wriggled and squirmed when she moved.

“Why have you come?” growled the mermaid, not turning to face us.

I looked to Elynna, fear rushing through my body. I tried to swim back down the tunnel, but I felt as though I’d lost the ability to swim. My lungs began to burn again, struggling for air as the pressure of the water squeezed my chest.

“Why have you come?” asked the mermaid again. “You do not belong in my domain!”

The mermaid turned quickly, revealing burning red eyes; her face was dark and haggard. Around her neck, glowing like a beacon, was a necklace.

She clutched the charm to her chest. “You will die, Captain Jameson Shaw! Just like your son!”

I pleaded with my eyes, begging Elynna to help me. I pushed off the wall to propel down the tunnel, but I misjudged my angle, sending me right into the clutches of the mutant creatures that littered the ground. Their long, sticky fingers wrapped around my wrists and legs, pulling me down.

I screamed, water filling my lungs. The burn was excruciating. I turned my face and saw Elynna floating nearby.

“Don’t trust her,” she warned. “It will mean your death. You must take her power. Take the necklace, James.”

I thrashed against my captors, to no avail. My eyes darkened; my lungs filled with water.

I SHOT up in my bed so quickly I ended up tumbling to the floor. Sweat ran down my face and chest as I gasped for breath.

“Captain?” said Mr. Smee. He was standing in the frame of the door to my quarters. “Blimey, Captain, are you all right?”

A dream, I thought. *It was only a dream.* I continued to suck fresh air into my lungs.

Smee ran to my aid, hoisting me to my feet.

“Yes, thank you,” I said, trying to gain my composure. “Just a bit of unrest is all. I’ll be fine.” I stretched, allowing my bones to crack and muscles to stretch.

“It’s just before sunrise, Captain,” Smee said. “It’s almost time.”

“Yes, true right,” I said, attempting to shake off the terror the dream had caused. “Make ready the men.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Smee said, making a hasty retreat.

I walked to the window and looked out. The sun was touching the horizon with an orange and purple glow floating through the sky.

A knock came at the door.

“Enter,” I said.

Zerena stood in the doorway. She looked exceptionally beautiful; her tanned skin shimmered in the light. Emeralds and diamonds were woven into her long black hair. She had wrapped herself in a satin garment that clasped shut behind her neck.

“Wow,” I said, unable to control my reaction. “I mean, you look beautiful.”

She smiled. “Thank you, James. I wanted to look nice for your big day.”

She walked into the room and shut the door behind her.

My heart started to thump. I hadn’t had time to wake the men and warn them she was on board. “Let me get you something to eat. It won’t take Cookie but a minute to grab us some bread and cheese.”

“That’s quite all right,” she said, waving it off. “I’m not hungry. I’d think you wouldn’t be either. Your day of revenge has come. I’m sure that’s enough to feed your appetite for now.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I said, taking a few deliberate steps toward the door. “But I could use a rum. Just a small one, mind you,” I said. “To settle my nerves.” I put my hand on the doorknob. “I’ll be a moment.”

“Isn’t that your rum, James?” Zerena asked, pointing to my decanter on the desk.

Blast! I thought. “Oh, there it is! Thank you, my dear.”

I walked over and poured myself a glass, throwing it back, relishing in the warmth the amber liquid brought.

“So, now that you’ve had your drink, let’s go get your little mermaid,” Zerena said, turning toward the door.

“Let’s… let’s wait, a few more moments, you see,” I said. I could tell I was acting odd. “I want to make sure my men have slept off their drink. Plus, a few moments together isn’t such a bad thing.”

She smiled. “I suppose not. I only thought you would be ready for this to get underway. You were so adamant about it last night. You haven’t changed your mind, have you?”

“Me? Never!” I said too quickly. “I want it to be perfect. We can’t afford any mistakes.”

“Like letting Elynna escape,” she said, staring at me.

“Yes, like letting Elynna es—” I stared at her, realizing she had called her Elynna. I could have continued to play dumb, but the look in her eyes told me that Zerena was aware of Elynna’s release.

We sat in silence, staring at each other.

“I saw you, James,” she hissed. “You carried her up, held her in your arms and kissed her. Then you let her go.”

I thought it could have been a trick of the light, but I was certain her skin took on a much darker tinge. Her hair appeared more wild and unkempt than it had been a few moments before.

“Zerena, I can explain,” I said, knowing it would be pointless.

“How long have you known?” she screeched.

I attempted to keep my desk between us as I made measured steps to move closer to the tapestry by the door. If I could distract her long enough, I would be able to lure her to the rug and pull the rope.

“Yesterday,” I said. “I came down to bring you both some food and I overheard you.”

Her eyes flashed. “You were eavesdropping!”

“Not intentionally,” I said. Just a few more steps and I would be in place.

“What did you hear?” she asked, taking several steps closer. She was on the edge of the rug, but not in the middle where she needed to be.

I took two more steps until I was in the right place to pull the rope. Now it was a matter of getting her to move to the center of the rug.

“I’d say I heard pretty much everything,” I said. “She’s Neptune’s daughter. You are going to kill her and try to take Atlantis for your own. You plan to kill me if I don’t go along with your plan, which leads us to our present situation.”

“You could have had it all!” she bellowed, stepping forward. “You would have been a king, a ruler!”

“I’m the king of my ship, that’s all I need,” I said.

“That, and revenge,” she said with a sly smile. “How will you get your revenge now? Peter Pan killed your son and you are going to let him keep besting you?”

Yes, she hit a nerve. She dared speak of my son? “Listen, you witch, I’m done with the banter. It’s over. Elynna’s gone to tell her father everything. I’d say he’s on his way here right now.”

Zerena burst into laughter. “You naïve fool! I saw you kiss her. I was there! Do you think I really let her swim off to tell Daddy all the dirty secrets she discovered?”

Anger flooded me. “Where is she? What have you done with her?”

She chortled harder, not answering.

I pulled my dagger and threw it toward her. It stopped an inch from her face and fell to her feet. Though she was still smiling, she stopped laughing. Her smile transformed into a sinister grimace. “You dare try to harm me?” She began walking toward me, bloodlust in her eyes.

When she finally crossed the center of the rug, I reached behind the tapestry and pulled the cord. Zerena fell to her knees as the net and rug hugged her, pulling her into the air. She screamed out in anger, struggling against the ropes.

At the sound of the ruckus, Mr. Smee and three other men tore into the room.

“You got her, Captain!” Smee cried. “You captured the sea witch!”

The men cheered.

Zerena’s guffaw caused my skin to crawl. It started low in her throat and got louder and louder. The ropes began to squeak and strain. As quickly as the net grabbed her, it released her. She landed gracefully on her feet.

“What witchcraft is this?” I said.

“You think Neptune’s broken net is any good to you now?” she asked. “You destroyed the spell when you rescued me.”

“Perhaps not,” I said, drawing my sword. “But try your strength against pirate steel!”

Smee and the other men drew their swords. The five of us had her surrounded; she had nowhere to turn.

“Now!” I cried. All five of us charged her at once.

There was a loud crack and then she was gone, leaving nothing behind but sand.

“What happened, Captain?” Smee asked.

I leaned down on one knee, picked up a handful of the sand and let it slip through my fingers. “I’d say we got bested by the evil sea witch.”

I WAS CERTAIN ZERENA HAD ELYNNA AND, GIVEN OUR ORIGINAL PLAN, I had a pretty good idea where she would take her.

We set sail for the Mermaid Lagoon. My only chance was to try and get Neptune's attention and ask for his aid before he called his legions of merfolk to bring down the ship.

I allowed the wind to gently sail the ship into the lagoon. "Keep an eye out, men. We've entered mermaid waters."

The men were visibly shaken. They'd take on an army in battle not blinking an eye, but talk of mermaids or cursed waters and they shook in their boots.

I kept my wits about me as I steered through perilous rocks and small whirlpools. My hope was we would sight some mermaids soon and beg

they bring Neptune to the surface. Then, I simply had to explain the situation to him before he killed us all.

I turned hard to port, maneuvering between two boulders that were larger than the ship itself. As we sailed out of their shadow, I spotted Pan zipping through the air. He spun and snickered.

“What kind of boy doesn’t notice when his friend’s gone missing?” I mumbled under my breath.

“Mermaid!” cried Mr. Bones from the crow’s nest.

Below where Pan was flying, a tail slipped into the water.

“Hurry, men!” I cried. “We must try.”

Pan spun through the air, drawing his sword, and landed on the deck. “You dare come into the lagoon?”

“I don’t have time for your games, boy,” I barked. “Elynna’s been taken by the sea witch Zerena. If I don’t get word to Neptune she coul—”

Pan broke out into an uncontrollable laughter, holding his stomach as he doubled over.

“You think your friend’s kidnapping is funny?”

“Not at all,” Pan said. “But Elynna’s not been taken.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded. “Zerena said she saw me release Elynna. She said she had taken her and planned to kill her.”

“Kill me?” I heard a soft voice ask.

I looked up to find Elynna hanging from the rail, struggling to get up on the deck.

“No, Elynna!” Pan cried, flying to her. “They’ll hurt you.”

I gave Smee the helm and ran down on deck toward her.

“The captain wouldn’t hurt me,” she said, smiling up at me.

“But he’s a pirate,” Pan argued, trying to push her back into the water.

“No, Peter,” she snapped. She reached her hand out to me. “He’s a good man. He’s here to help.”

I took her hand and pulled her to me. “Elynna. How is…? Zerena, she said she saw me release you. She said she had taken you and planned to kill you.”

“My aunt Zerena is a lot of things, but she wouldn’t hurt me,” Elynna insisted.

I furrowed my brow. “Elynna, how can you say such a thing? When I released you, you said you were going to warn your father.”

“Warn him of what?”

Pan eyed me suspiciously. “What game are you playing at, pirate?”

“This is no game!” I spat. “Elynna, do you remember nothing of being aboard my ship?”

“Of course!” she chirped. “You kidnapped me to get your revenge on Peter but then changed your mind after we spent a few days talking. That’s when you released me.”

My jaw dropped in awe. *Her memory has been taken*, I thought. Was that even possible?

Elynna stared at me warily. I was sure in her eyes I appeared to be angry.

“The kiss?” I asked. “When you kissed me, there was some kind of magic that—”

“Kiss?” Elynna and Pan yelled in unison.

“So it’s true. Zerena has taken your memories.” I sighed. “She removed herself and the memory of… Well, she removed some of the memories. The important ones.”

“Zerena wouldn’t do that,” Elynna argued. “She likes to create mischief, to be sure, but she wouldn’t—”

“That may be true,” I interrupted, “but I have no doubt she plans to use you to get Atlantis. Taking your memories is part of it. She is biding her time. We have to warn your father and get you out of here before she can get to you.”

“I can’t leave,” she argued.

“You must.”

“But my father, my family and friends. Atlantis is my home.” She looked off in the distance at nothing as she weighed her options. It was obvious she was struggling.

“It wouldn’t have to be forever,” I said. “Just long enough to let your father be rid of her for good.”

“This is silly,” Pan interrupted. “I will protect you, Elynna, and you won’t have to leave Neverland.”

“What would you know about protecting anyone?” I hissed.

“Please,” Elynna pleaded. “Don’t fight.”

“He wants to take you away from me,” Peter whined.

“I want to save her life, you bloody fool!” I barked.

“You’re making this up so you can take her again!” Pan pointed his sword at me. “Come on, pirate. Show me wh—”

“Enough!” Elynna cried. “I won’t have you both fighting!”

“Elynna, please,” I begged. “Let me help you. If you don’t come with me, she will kill you the moment she’s given the chance.”

“I wish I could come. It might even be fun.” She smiled at me. “But if what you say is true, I can’t leave my father while Zerena’s on the loose.”

“It’s exactly the right time to leave,” I retorted. “With you safely out of the way, he can concentrate on protecting his kingdom and removing her as a problem.”

“James, I can’t,” she said sadly.

My fear turned into anger. “So you’d rather stay with this little boy and die as some pawn in a play for your kingdom? This is ludicrous, Elynna! You’re absolutely insane.”

“You don’t mean that,” she said. “Besides, I must stay with my father.”

“Then let us ask him,” I countered. “Summon your father here and ask him if he would rather you stay behind where your evil aunt plans to use

your life as a bargaining chip for Atlantis. Ask him! Let me remind you, once this is all done, she plans to kill you."

"He hates pirates," she said. "He'd sooner kill you than see me sail away with you."

Her words brought me up short. She was right. King Neptune hated all who lived on the surface. He would see it as me trying to trick him into taking his daughter away from him. I had to do something. I couldn't leave her behind and let her be hurt.

"Then let me stay with you here," I said. "Stay on my ship. We'll remain at Neverland, but you will be safe on my ship."

"What makes you think your ship is so safe?" Pan interjected. "Last time I checked, you were fresh out of magic fairies." He laughed.

I ground my teeth and tried to hold my anger together while Elynna considered my offer.

"I can't leave the water for more than a few hours, James," she said. "It's no use. I would be putting you and your men in jeopardy."

I huffed in exasperation. "It was me who put you in danger in the first place, Elynna. I'm trying to fix my mistake."

She smiled, cupping my cheek with her hand. "And that proves what a good man you are, Jameson Shaw." She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

I had tried everything short of actually kidnapping her. She wasn't coming of her free will. And though I would have happily kidnapped her to save her, I couldn't do that. I couldn't kidnap her—again.

I sat her down on the edge of the rail. She swung her tail over it and dove into the water below.

Pan studied me. "Were you telling the truth?"

His voice caused bile to rise in my throat. There were no accurate words to describe how much I loathed him. However, he was Elynna's best chance at this point.

“Yes,” I said. “And you must protect her at all costs, Pan. Don’t mess up like you did with Owen. Protect her, save her.”

Pan rolled his eyes at me. “I will. I have been.”

“You must promise me you will sacrifice your life to save her if it comes to it,” I ordered.

The disrespectful attitude that had lingered on Pan disappeared. He straightened up and took my words to heart. “I will protect her with my life.”

SEVERAL DAYS WENT BY WITHOUT A WORD FROM ZERENA, NOR ELYNNA AND Pan. My crew were getting restless staying so close to the Mermaid Lagoon. They had their fill of Neverland and were ready to move on to new waters. It took a great deal of rum and promises of coin to keep them in good spirits. However, the time to leave Neverland had come.

Just after sunrise, I sent Smee and several of the men into port to gather supplies. Around noon, they returned and began stocking the provisions for our journey.

“When do we set sail, Captain?” Smee asked.

“As soon as necessities are secured and all men are accounted for,” I said. “You made sure to get plenty of rum?”

“As always, Captain,” Smee answered, heading below deck to make preparations.

I stood at the helm, ready to give the order to weigh anchor, when a faint glint caught my eye. It looked like a tiny star whizzing through the air, making its way across the water.

Tinker Bell zigzagged through the air around the ship and landed on the wheel.

“Captain,” she said with the smallest curtsey and gasps of breath.

“Ah, Ms. Fairy,” I said, knowing she didn’t like the nickname.

“It’s Tinker Bell, if you please,” she corrected, taking another deep lungful of air. “I’m here on behalf of Peter Pan.”

I waved her off. “You can tell Pan I’m done with him and his childish games. My crew and I are headed for new water and new lands.”

“You can’t!” she screeched.

Her tone took me aback. With fairies it was hard to tell the difference between a cry of childish tantrum and one of frustration.

“All right, I’ll bite,” I joked. “What’s happened to get you so ill at ease?”

“Peter sent me,” she said. “He wants to meet with you. He says you have to help him.”

I laughed. “Help him? Is this a joke? Another of his foolish games?”

“No!” the fairy said, holding out her arms in surrender. “He needs you. The sea witch… she took Elynna. You were right!”

My heart seized. “Elynna?”

“She took her just like you said,” Tinker Bell confessed.

I ground my teeth. “Where was Pan in all this?”

“He tried to save her. We both did,” she defended. “But Zerena’s too powerful. She took the little mermaid and…”

“Well?” I asked, throwing my hands up. “What happened? Did she hurt her?”

“No, Elynna wasn’t hurt, at least not when I left,” Tinker Bell stammered. “But Zerena told Peter she would make a deal with him.”

I glowered at her. “A deal? She wants to make a deal with Pan?”

Tinker Bell nodded, not making eye contact with me. “She told Pan, if he helped lure you in, she would release Elynna unharmed, and give her the ability to have legs.”

I sat there in silence for a few moments. “And should I take your presence as a sign he didn’t take the deal? Or perhaps he did and is using this as a ploy to make me think he’s on my side.”

“No! Well, yes. I mean, he told her he would, but he really isn’t,” she spluttered.

“Then why isn’t he here?” I asked.

“He feared you would not hear him out,” she explained. “He knows Zerena has no intension of releasing Elynna. The sea witch is out to take control of Atlantis. Elynna is the one weapon she has against King Neptune.”

It made sense. Zerena saw Pan as a simpleton boy who was easily manipulated. *No, that’s just you,* I thought, reflecting on how easily she manipulated me.

“All right, you have my attention, Tinker Bell,” I said. “Does Pan have a plan, or does he expect me to swoop in and save the day?”

“He asked me lead you to him,” she said. “He and his Lost Boys are preparing for battle in the forest. He would like to meet on neutral ground.”

“Neutral ground?” I laughed. “He knows Neverland better than anyone.”

“I mean to say, he wants it to be only you and him,” she explained. “The Lost Boys will stay in their camp and your crew will stay aboard the ship.”

“Don’t trust her, Captain,” Mr. Smee said. “It’s pixie mischief. You saw how quickly she betrayed you.”

“You kidnapped me!” she screeched at Smee. “And I kept my word! The ship flew. I simply stopped the fighting before someone got killed.”

“I have your word Pan has no other meaning for this meeting?” I asked. “Your fairy promise that Pan wants to meet in order for us to work together to save Elynna?”

“Yes, you have my word,” Tinker Bell said, planting her fists on her tiny hips. “You’re on the same side, Captain.”

“Well, then, my wee lass,” I said with a mischievous smile, “lead the way.”

TINKER BELL LED me past the port village and into the dense woods separating the town from the beach beyond.

Roughly a half hour into the trek, Tinker Bell stopped. “We’re here.”

I looked around, turning in place. We were surrounded by trees and shrubs. No signs of life but for the birds in the trees.

“Where exactly is here?” I asked. “We’re in the middle of the bloody forest. This isn’t a location that can be mapped.”

“It is when you mark the meeting site with fairy magic,” Tinker Bell mused.

Just then, there was a rustling from the canopy above. Some leaves fell from their branches, and Pan descended from the sky, landing in front of me.

Though we were here on common purpose, the sight of him caused bile to rise in my throat. I attempted to push the feelings down in order to keep my mind on the task. On saving Elynna.

“Thank you for coming,” Pan said.

The temptation to throw back an insult about being unable to protect her was tempting, but I figured we needed to keep our heads about us. “Aye, so tell me what you know.”

“I’m guessing Tinker Bell has already told you she tried to get me to lure you into a trap?” Pan asked.

“Yes,” I said. “And she made me a fairy promise that this *meeting* isn’t your way of going through with that bargain.”

“No!” Pan said, eyes wide with surprise. “No, Captain. I know who Zerena is and what she wants. If we don’t save Elynna, she will kill her.”

“Do you know where she has taken Elynna?” I asked.

“Crocodile Beach,” Tinker Bell answered.

Just as I suspected. Chances were, whatever trap she had planned to use on Pan, she would now try to use on me. All the while, using Elynna as a weapon against King Neptune.

“King Neptune,” I said. “Does he know? Could we not use his power against her as well?”

“I’ve dispatched several mermaids to send him word,” Tinker Bell said.

“But we are running out of time,” Pan said. “She has Elynna out in the sun. Her skin is burning. She will die if we wait too long.”

“Do you have a plan?” I asked.

“I was hoping you would,” Pan said, looking much more like a scared child than I’d ever seen him.

“Tinker Bell said you had agreed to Zerena’s bargain… the one where you lure me in,” I said.

“Yes,” Pan said. “I knew if I didn’t make her at least think I was considering it, she would kill Elynna outright.”

“So that is what we do,” I said. “I sail in like an unaware fool. The longer she thinks you’re fighting on the same side, the more of an

advantage we have."

I began drawing a diagram, with help from Tinker Bell and Pan, on a parchment for use on my ship. I had never sailed all the way into the lagoon, and certainly not as far as Crocodile Beach.

When we finally had our plan hatched, I grabbed up the parchment and my satchel to leave.

"Wait," Pan said, reaching out and gripping my forearm.

"Do not mistake me, boy," I said. "I do this for Elynna, not you."

Pan released my arm. "I know, I just… I'm sorry about Owen. I never meant for it to happen."

Hearing Pan say my son's name flooded me with emotions. Not just anger, but regret and sorrow.

"Answer me this," I said. "Why take him in the first place? Why take him away from his mother in the middle of the night?"

"This may not be the best time or place for this discussion, boys," Tinker Bell interjected.

"He begged me to," Pan blurted out. "He asked me to teach him to be a pirate like his father."

I felt as though someone had dumped a bucket of cold water over me. "He… he knew I was a pirate? His mother said she never…"

"People in his village talked," Pan explained. "He ended up finding out from some boys whose parents wouldn't let them play with him anymore. They teased him. Said he was a pirate's bastard."

My heart sank. "If I would have stayed away, none of this would have happened."

"No, Captain," Tinker Bell said. "It was not your fault. Some people can be so cruel."

"He loved you," Pan said. "That's why he wanted to be like you. He thought, if he could learn the ways of a pirate, you would take him as part of your crew."

“And instead, he was killed by the very kind of man he wanted to be,” I said regretfully.

“You mustn’t look at it that way, Captain,” Tinker Bell said. “He died because he loved his father so much.”

“He died protecting the mermaids too,” Pan said. “If it hadn’t been for him, several of them would have been taken and killed for sport. In the end, he was as true a hero as they come.”

Though dragging up the memories of my son were painful, hearing a true account of his short time in Neverland felt like a soothing balm to my heart. Pan hadn’t kidnapped him, he’d rescued him from a village that persecuted him.

I reached out my hand to Pan. “Then let us both honor his memory today and save Elynna.”

Pan took my hand and shook it. “For Owen.”

As part of the plan, I sent half my crew with the Lost Boys. None of them were happy about it, but we had a common enemy and they were sworn to be on their best behavior.

I briefed the remainder of my crew on the situation as I sailed across the Mermaid Lagoon to Crocodile Beach. If the name alone wasn't enough to deter most sailors, the sight of it would. From a distance, the beach and waters looked as though they were covered with large, rough rocks. However, as we got closer, it was obvious the land and water were teeming with crocodiles.

"Captain," Mr. Smee whimpered, staring through a spyglass. "Are those…?"

“Crocodiles? Yes, Mr. Smee. What did you think they had at Crocodile Beach? Unicorns?”

“But there are so many.”

I grabbed Smee by the shoulder. “Yes, there are many. But they’re animals, and we’re not alone. Pan and his Lost Boys are in this with us. We have Tinker Bell as well. And King Neptune will be here soon enough. I’m certain his power is enough to knock off a handful of crocodiles. Right now, what I need is for you to keep your wits about you. I can’t do this without you, Smee.”

He took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

“Good,” I said, relieved. “Now ready the men.”

Crocodile Beach hadn’t always had its name. It was once a great port for Neverland. However, being situated within the Mermaid Lagoon created quite the problem for ships going through. After more and more mermaid attacks on ships began happening, less cargo came into the village. After a while, the people who lived and worked there moved to different areas of Neverland.

It was said the crocodiles themselves came from another part of the world. A land of magic and mischief where a witch used her power to manipulate animals, bending them to her will. They escaped her clutches and found their new home on the outermost beach of the Mermaid Lagoon. The very beach that used to be one of the greatest ports in Neverland.

The difficult task was going to be docking. There was very little to be done if I could not leave my ship safely to confront Zerena. Thankfully, there was an abandoned dock left from the trading village. Tinker Bell assured me she used her magic to strengthen the integrity of the wood.

“Here’s hoping, little fairy,” I murmured to myself as I pulled the ship to the dock.

From the ship, I could see the contraption Elynna was strapped to. It was a tall beam with an arm that apparently could be moved higher or

lower, depending on where a person secured the rope on the back. The length of Elynna's tail had been wrapped in rope and attached to the arm. She appeared to be unconscious, hanging upside down in the sun. Her skin was red, and her scales seemed to be tearing where the rope dug too deep.

The sight was more than I could bear. I averted my eyes and concentrated on the plan.

"Lower the gangplank, boys," I commanded. "And keep a weather eye."

I pulled Mr. Smee to the side. "You stay aboard with Mr. Bones and the Bailey twins. Have the ship ready to set sail immediately if need be. Once Elynna, the crew and the Lost Boys are on board, you go."

"But, Captain," Smee said, "what about you?"

"Please, you must do this for me," I pleaded. "If I'm too late, I will cut through the island and meet you on the other side. You must get Elynna to King Neptune or we're all doomed anyway."

Smee took a hard gulp. "Aye, aye, Captain."

When I stepped foot on the dock, the damp wood squeaked under my weight. *I hope you know what you are doing, fairy*, I thought. At the end of the dock stood Zerena. She had her hands squarely planted on her hips. Even knowing the evil sea witch she was, her beauty was intoxicating as always.

A few of my men ventured out on the dock with me, following my lead. Their swords were drawn, and they were battle ready.

As we walked, I stared the witch down.

"I considered picking a new spot," Zerena mocked, looking around at the beach. "I should have known you'd come here first."

"Isn't that what you wanted?" I hissed. "You wanted me to come for her. So here I am."

"How did you know I took her?" she asked. "I know you saw her after I left you."

“Pan said you took her. Knocked him clean out while he was trying to get her to safety,” I lied. “Apparently he was too scared to go up against you, but I’m not.”

Zerena looked puzzled for a moment, but then her frown turned up into a smile. She began to laugh. “He convinced you he was scared of me? Oh you poor, pitiful fool!”

I feigned confusion. “What are you talking about?” I continued to make my way up the dock.

Pan swooped down from out of the trees behind her and landed on the dock halfway between Zerena and me. “You’re the reason she took Elynna. If I help her kill you, she’ll release Elynna.”

I stared hard at Pan, trying to decide if I had been double-crossed or if Pan was simply a good liar. He winked at me so no one but I could see it.

That’s the signal, I thought. I drew my sword and took off down the deck toward Pan. The air erupted with the sound of our swords connecting.

We fought hard against one another, all while trying not to cause harm. It was an odd feeling to be play-fighting with Pan. But the diversion was working. During one of my turns toward Zerena, I noticed her attention focused on us. The few crocodiles who were awake seemed absorbed by the commotion we were making.

Over Zerena’s shoulder, I could see some of my crew and the Lost Boys slink out of the forest and run across the beach. They were trying to cut Elynna down without dropping her into the pile of crocodiles sunning themselves below. One ill-planned step and they could end up croc food.

Pan and I continued to fight, all while slowly traveling down the dock toward Zerena. We would get one chance to jump her, so the element of surprise was vital.

Just a few more moments and we’ll have her, I thought. *We just have to wait until Tinker Bell gives the signal*. Pan’s blade came down hard, sliding across my sword and slicing a small cut into my forearm. I looked

up at him with a stern look. He smirked, shrugging his shoulders in way of apology.

I saw a glint out of the corner of my eye. Tinker Bell was coming; it was time. But before Tinker Bell arrived, a loud crash echoed from the beach. We all stopped and turned to see my crew and the Lost Boys tangled in Elynna's rope, trying to free her while the crocodiles turned on them.

"Bloody hell!" I shouted, knowing the plan had been ruined.

"You dare double-cross me, Pan?" Zerena screamed. "So be it!"

She threw up her hands, letting loose a powerful gale, knocking me to my back. Pan, still airborne, was swept up in the wind, tumbling end over end and landing hard into the mast of the ship.

I scrambled to my feet. There wasn't a moment to lose if I was going to keep the sea witch busy. I pulled a dagger from my boot and launched it down the dock. It grazed Zerena's thigh. Her smooth skin sliced open and thick, dark red blood began oozing from the wound. She pressed her hand over it, trying to stanch the blood.

"So you can bleed," I mocked. "Such an important detail, you see. Because if you can be wounded, you can indeed be killed."

She grimaced. "Killed by you? Hardly. You lack neither the intellect nor the skill to take down the likes of me."

I walked toward her nonchalantly, as though I wasn't scared out of my mind. It was a hard feat to accomplish, but I had to keep her attention on me.

"I beg to differ," I said with a smile. "I seem to remember several situations where I took you down. In fact, you were begging me to."

I risked a glance at the beach. The Lost Boys had succeeded in releasing Elynna, but they dragged her away from the water due to the crocs. The crocodiles were congregated so tightly, the boys had nowhere to go. I had to buy Pan and the fairy more time.

“You used me,” Zerena shouted. “I was ready to have you by my side. You would have been my king.”

“I used you?” I laughed dryly. “You seem to have forgotten the messy bits about planning to kill Elynna and usurping King Neptune. Oh, and let’s not forget the fact that, if I refused this plan, you were going to kill me. Which leads us to right here, right now.”

“You made me believe you cared,” Zerena cried. “You said we would travel the sea together.”

“Please don’t insult me by feigning heartbreak,” I goaded. “We both know you merely saw me as a means to an end.”

She ground her teeth, still pressing hard on the wound. She gripped her necklace tight with her other hand.

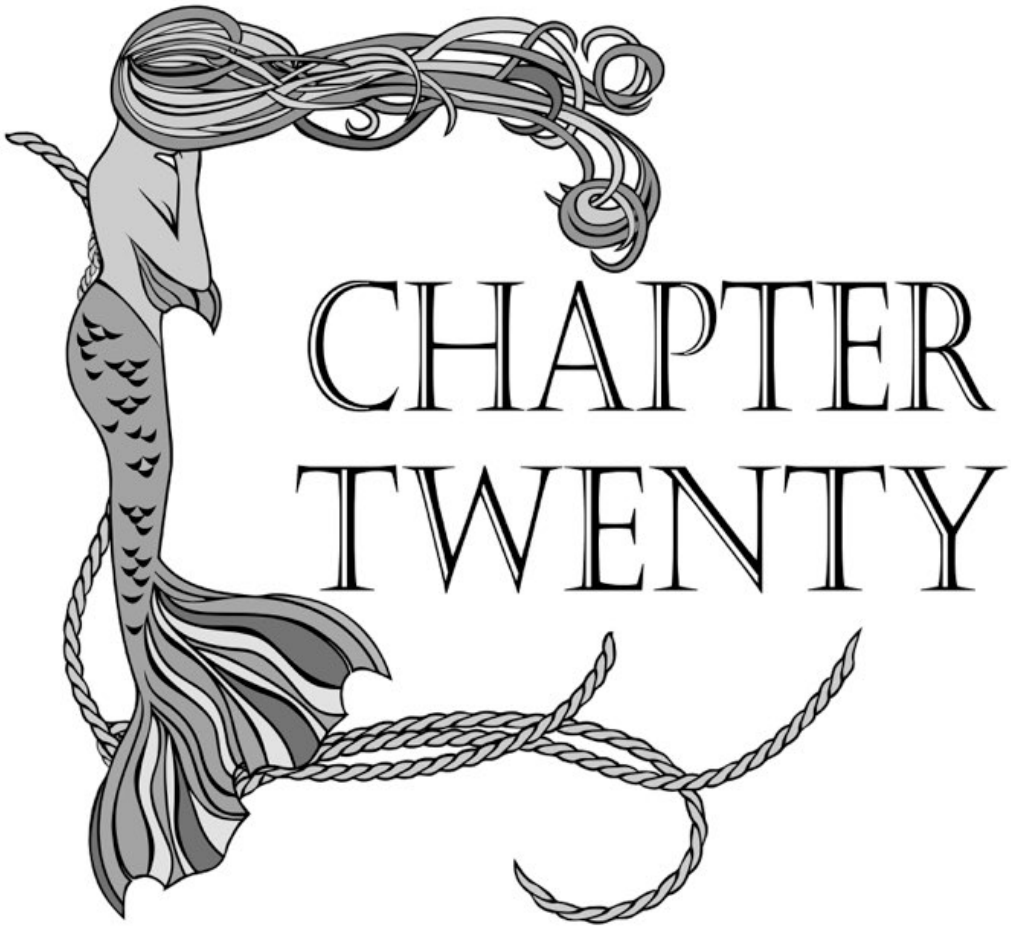
Her magic, I thought. *If I destroy the pendant, it could stop her.*

“You said you were the victim,” I growled, stepping closer. “You played the poor, innocent do-gooder Neptune saw as a threat to his crown. Don’t play coy with me, my lady, you’ve only proven that we’re both liars. This comes as no surprise to me, as I have always known myself to be less than honest.”

Zerena let out a blood-curdling scream and threw her arms out, preparing to release a spell.

Tinker Bell swooped down with a handful of fairies by her side. Together, they created a glittering rope that wrapped around the sea witch’s hands, binding them. They zigged and zagged through the air, wrapping the magic tighter around Zerena.

“Hurry, Captain,” Tinker Bell called. “We won’t be able to hold her for long.”



I REACHED OUT, GRIPPING ZERENA'S PENDANT IN MY HAND. IT GLOWED bright, growing hot. I let out a cry of pain, releasing it when it burned my flesh. "Damn, it's spelled!"

Zerena gave a growl as she fought her bonds. "That's right. You can't win this, Captain."

"Where's Pan?" I shouted to Tinker Bell.

"He must still be on the ship," she replied. "He was knocked out. I can go check on him."

"No! Not yet, I need your help." I ran down the dock toward the beach, stopping in my tracks as I reached the sand. The whole area was covered with bloodthirsty crocodiles. "Tinker Bell, can you do something about these beasts?"

“Animal magic is rare, Captain,” Tinker Bell said. “The best we can do is create something to deter them… but what?”

Pan zipped through the air overhead. “I’m here.”

“Where the bloody hell have you been?” I shouted.

“Napping,” Pan said sarcastically.

“Well, while you were napping, I’ve been busy trying to save everyone,” I snapped. “Think you could lend a hand?”

“Sure,” Pan answered, flying through the air over the crocodiles in my path. Apparently, they preferred their food young and on the move, because the taunting motions of Pan’s flight were drawing them away from the docks.

“We still need to get the lot of them out of the way if Elynna and the Lost Boys are to escape,” I whispered, stepping out onto the sands and giving a wide berth to the closest croc.

Tinker Bell fluttered by my ear. “But what?” she murmured. “Crocodiles aren’t known for having weaknesses.”

“Think of something!” I shouted. “Heavy waves, a sandstorm, anything!” I instantly regretted my tone, as the nearest croc flipped its big, armored tail, turning itself toward me.

“That’s it!” she said. “Fairies, let’s make the wind blow the sand hard at them. Perhaps it will force them into the water.” She looked at me. “Brace yourself, this won’t be pleasant.”

The wind began to pick up. It felt as though it traveled through the trees of the forest and pushed down at the water. Sand began to fly through the air. Each little grain stung as it whipped against my exposed face. I pulled out my handkerchief and wrapped it around my face, covering my nose and mouth. I shielded my eyes as best I could with my hand.

The crocodiles were not overly fond of the sandblast either. They turned their backs to the onslaught and retreated for the water.

I faced the sand and wind making my way up the beach to where my men, the Lost Boys and Elynna had been cornered.

“Hurry, boys,” I called through my makeshift mask. “To my ship.”

I ran to Elynna’s side and threw my coat over her. She winced in pain. The sun had burned her skin raw, and the sand beat against her. I covered her as best I could, then pulled her into my arms. “I’ve got you now.”

“You came for me,” she whispered.

“Of course,” I said. I took off at a jog. “Come, boys, stay with me.”

The young boys filed in close behind me, with the rest of my men behind them. I looked to the water and saw Pan still working to keep the angry crocs distracted.

We were pounding our way down the dock toward the ship when I noticed Zerena had disappeared. “Where is she?” I shouted. “Tinker Bell, what happened to the sea witch?”

“Our magic must have worn off,” she cried. “Hurry, we must leave before she regains her strength.”

It was a short dock, but the run felt like miles as we piled everyone onto the ship.

“Set sail, Mr. Smee,” I cried.

“What about Peter?” asked one of the boys.

I looked back at the beach. Most of the crocodiles were in the water now, but Pan was nowhere to be found. “Pan!” I screamed. I searched the sky, hoping this was his idea of a cruel trick. “Peter!” I called again.

“We have to go back,” Elynna said.

I grabbed up some rope and headed for a longboat. “I’ll go. Mr. Smee, you get them to safety.”

Just then, a waterspout formed beside the ship.

“Watch out!” I cried, bracing myself. The waterspout grew smaller and splashed onto the deck of the ship. It slowed in motion and quickly melted

away, leaving Zerena standing on the deck holding Pan in a fisherman's net.

"Did you lose something?" She laughed, shaking the net with Pan in it.

Elynna cried. The Lost Boys gasped. My men pulled their swords.

"You're far outnumbered, Zerena," I growled. "Let the boy go and leave before King Neptune arrives."

"Let the boy go?" she snapped. "Is this not the same boy who you were willing to kill not a few nights past? Is he not the same boy you claim killed your son? Now you're asking me to spare him?"

"Things have changed," I argued. "It was a freak accident. Pan was not responsible for my son's death. He's only a boy, Zerena, let him go."

She threw her head back and laughed. "I like this. You begging for Peter Pan's life. My, my, my, how the tides have changed."

I could see the irony in the situation. Not long ago I begged for Pan's blood, now I pleaded for him not to be harmed. But the truth of the matter was, he was only a boy. He needed someone to look out for him and if that meant it had to be me, so be it.

"How about a trade?" I offered. "Let Pan go and you can take me instead."

"You think your life is worth anything?" she cackled. "You're just some meager pirate passing through."

"Then me," Tinker Bell said, bravely fluttering forward.

"Oh please," Zerena mocked. "Fairies are a dime a dozen, and your power isn't even all that impressive. No, no, that won't do. If you want Pan, you give me Elynna."

"No!" Pan cried from his bonds.

"Never," I hissed. "Elynna is not an option."

"Then I guess you will get to see the death of Pan, after all," Zerena said.

She snapped her fingers and a crocodile materialized on the deck. Everyone shuffled back several feet to make room for the mammoth creature.

“Are you hungry, my pet?” Zerena asked, holding the captive boy over the beast.

“No!” Elynna, Tinker Bell and I cried out in unison.

At our screams, the croc’s tail whipped, throwing a barrel across the deck. We scattered as the barrel flew to the side rail and shattered into kindling, splinters flying everywhere.

“All right, men,” I called. “Take down the beast!”

Like a well-oiled machine, the men took turns lunging and stabbing, working the crocodile back.

Zerena laughed. “Let’s even the odds.”

Five more crocodiles materialized, crowding the deck. The men went into a panic. The crocodiles were so big, their bodies could not maneuver without slamming into something. Wood splintered and barrels rolled as man and beast squared off. Between the sound of screams and croc growls, I could hear Zerena’s sinister laughter.

“Tinker Bell!” I yelled. “Please tell me you can handle this.”

“Animal magic is—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, hard,” I mocked, bringing my sword down against the armored back of the nearest croc. “Can’t you make them disappear?”

“Yes, it will take some effort,” she said, zipping off to a croc and beginning to sprinkle dust over it. I wasn’t sure how difficult the actual magic was but getting close enough to the beast without getting caught in its snapping jaws seemed challenging.

I grabbed Elynna up in my arms. “You have to get back in the water. Your father is on his way; go warn him.”

As I put her up on the edge of the rail, I heard Zerena’s menacing voice behind me. “Not so fast, Captain. I can’t have you taking my prize away

from me.”

Right before my eyes, Elynna’s tail turned into a pair of slender pale legs.

“My tail!” Elynna cried, falling against the rail. I tried to stand her up on the deck, but she slid from my arms and crumpled to the ground.

“You must stand, love,” I urged, pulling her into my arms.

“I can’t,” she said, trying to make the new limbs work. “I don’t know how to use them.”

I tried again to stand her on her feet, but her newly formed legs wouldn’t hold her weight.

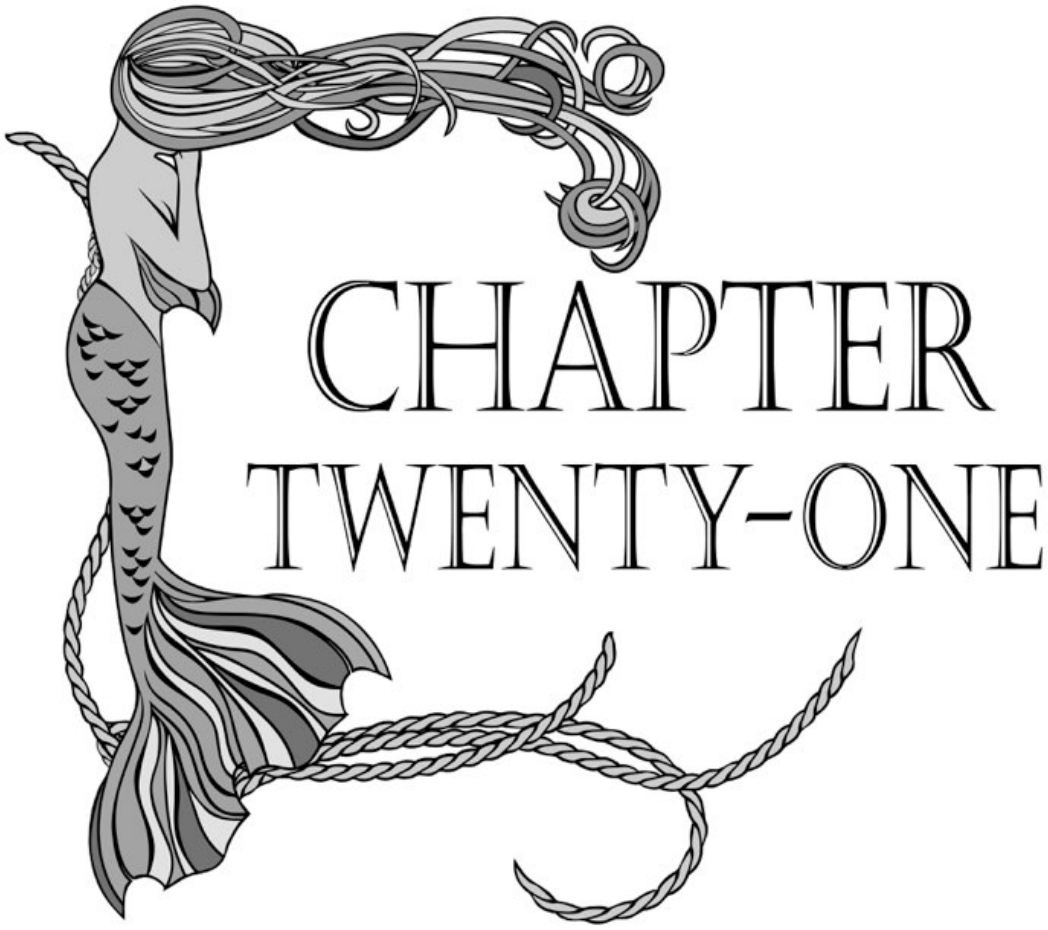
Zerena laughed. “Apparently she hasn’t gotten her sea legs yet.”

I clenched my teeth. *If she can’t stand, she’ll never be able to swim. She could drown,* I thought. *I have to stall Zerena until Neptune arrives.*

I scooped Elynna up in my arms and stowed her in a space under the steps that went up to the helm. “Stay here.” I pulled out a dagger. “Do your best to defend yourself.”

“No! She’ll kill you,” Elynna pleaded, reaching out.

“Don’t you worry about me,” I bragged. “I know how to handle a witch.”



I FOUGHT MY WAY THROUGH THE CROWD OF MEN, LOST BOYS AND BEASTS. Along the way I helped a few Lost Boys work back one of the brutes. Once done, I turned to face Zerena, but a croc lay in my way. It was a massive creature; its tail alone was longer than my bed. Its brackish skin looked rough, with large, armored ridges traveling from the back of its head all the way to the tip of its tail. It stared me down, its long mouth slightly open, showing menacing teeth. It growled a low, guttural noise that reverberated deep within its throat.

The croc lay curled with its tail in position so it could tail whip me right into its mouth should I get close enough.

“Feeling lucky, Captain?” Zerena mocked.

“Are you?” I goaded. “Neptune will be here any moment. And I’d bet my favorite pair of boots his magic can trump yours, otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to banish you from Atlantis.”

Her smile turned into a sneer. “I have his daughter. He’ll trade all his power to protect her.”

“You *had* his daughter,” I corrected. “Your best option is to leave now.”

I could see the anger boiling in her eyes. The slight shake of instability as the anger overtook her sense of reason. “You honestly believe you alone are a match for me?”

“Maybe not by myself,” I said, smirking. “But with a little help…” I reached behind my back, grabbing the dagger I kept tucked in my belt. With a swing of my arm, I launched the knife through the air. It made contact with the hand holding Pan’s net.

Zerena dropped the net, grabbing her hand and screaming out in pain. Pan fell in a heap on the ground, the net falling away from him. The croc turned quickly, facing Pan. Its mouth was agape as it neared to attack.

“Pan!” I called, tossing my short sword to him.

The boy leaped, flipping in the air, and grabbed the sword before it hit the ground. He kicked off the deck and soared. He swiftly doubled back, striking his sword into the beast’s back. However, the armor plating was too tough and thick for the sword to make a difference.

“Don’t worry about it,” I yelled to Pan. “Protect Elynna!” With my long sword, I slashed at the croc, pulling its attention from Pan.

“James!” Zerena screamed, having lost any semblance of composure and control. Blood ran from her injured hand as she cradled it to her chest. “Atlantis will be mine! You will give me Elynna or everyone here will die!”

Her eyes flashed to where I had stowed Elynna. Pan had Elynna by the hand, trying to pull her from the shelter of the stairs. “Get her!” she

commanded. The croc, as though it understood, turned and went for the stairs where Elynna lay.

“No!” I cried, scrambling across the deck. “What are you doing, you fool?” I barked, pulling Elynna to her unsteady feet and scooping her up in my arms.

“I’m going to get her out of here,” Pan argued, pulling on her arm. “I will fly her out over the water to safety.”

“You fool, she can’t swim,” I hissed. “She doesn’t know how to use her legs.”

Before Pan could argue, I was tail whipped right off my feet by the croc, falling hard to the ground. I managed to break Elynna’s fall, but she lay helpless in front of the beast.

Grabbing Elynna’s hand, I pulled her to me, but Pan grabbed her other hand and tried to go airborne.

Pan wasn’t strong enough to carry both Elynna and my weight. His hand slipped and he tumbled to the ground right in the spot the mermaid had been lying.

The croc opened its mouth wide, turning its head to attack.

“No!” I cried. I came to my knees and lunged, pushing Pan out of the way of its deadly jaws. As Pan’s body slid out of reach, the great toothed jaws of the croc clamped down on my hand.

I screamed in pain as the daggerlike teeth broke through the skin, straight to the bone. It jerked its long head back and forth, tossing me about like a rag doll, my sword flying from my good hand and sliding across the deck.

I struggled uselessly against the monster’s iron grip. The pain turning my vision dark, I reached out, searching to find anything I could use as a weapon.

I could hear Elynna’s screams and Zerena’s laughter mingling into one painful sound.

Pan flew overhead. “I’ll save you!” He brought the sword down again and again on the croc’s back, but to no avail.

I focused, clearing my eyes and looking up into the beast’s green slit eye. It was like coming face to face with a dragon. Evil and menacing as though it knew exactly the amount of pain it was inflicting.

Pan continued to strike the croc, but it only seemed to make it angrier, its hold tightening.

The tail whipped hard, tossing me to the side without letting go of my hand. Rigging flew everywhere as the croc’s tail thrashed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a silver glint. It was a gaffing hook. I stretched hard, feeling the pain in my hand as I pulled away. *Just a little farther,* I thought. *Almost have it.* My fingers wrapped around the hardened metal.

Pan flew overhead, holding his sword up. “Strike at the eyes!” He continued to strike the monster in the head.

I turned, using my weight to bring the hook down in the beast’s eye. It let out a guttural growl and went into a death roll, turning its body hard. As the croc moved its head to the side, Pan misjudged his swing. He sent the sword down, slicing right through my wrist.

The pain was immense, like nothing I had endured. At first, I thought my hand was still in the croc’s mouth, the pain as though the teeth were digging into my flesh, yet, the hand was no longer there. Instead, it lay in the mouth of the beast before me.

Zerena’s laughter filled the air, loud enough to drown out even my screams of pain.

“The irony!” she mocked. “The boy you swore to kill, you then fight so hard to rescue, only to have him cut off your hand!” She threw her head back, laughing more.

I held my arm to my chest, taking my scarf and wrapping it around the stump. The feeling of the fabric on the wound sent sickening waves of heat

over me, causing my stomach to turn and roll.

“Captain!” cried Mr. Bones, grabbing me by my shoulders and pulling me back.

My vision went blurry as the pain flooded my system. I could make out the shape of two dead crocs on the deck. Another, shimmering in gold fairy dust, had been lifted into the sky and floated away on the breeze. Had I not been in so much pain, I might have laughed.

“Re-form the lines, men,” cried Mr. Smee. “Take down the wretched sea witch!”

“You’re all fools!” Zerena cried. “You think your swords can match my power?” She threw her hands into the air and the wind grabbed the sails, lurching the ship forward. Everyone aboard tumbled across the ship’s deck, desperately reaching and grabbing for anything to brace themselves on. The last remaining crocodile slammed into the rail, its weight so heavy that it splintered the wood and fell overboard into the water below.

I scrambled to Elynna’s side, bracing her as best I could as crew and debris flew.

“Now to keep you out of my way,” the sea witch said. She raised her hands above her head and the nets, ropes and rigging sprang alive at her call. They spun through the air, wrapping around legs, arms, torsos and necks—tying the men and Lost Boys together. Even Pan, who tried to fly out of the reach of the magic, was snared by the ropes and wrapped around the mast.

“Much better,” Zerena said, stretching her arms out as though her muscles were strained by the effort of the magic. She turned her attention to Elynna and me. “So now it’s just the three of us.”

Zerena held out her hand, flicking her wrist. Elynna skidded across the rough deck and slammed into a barrel. Then, like an invisible line was tied to her legs, Elynna slid across the deck again, stopping at the edge of the broken rail.

“No!” Elynna screamed out, digging her nails in and fighting to push herself away from the edge.

Zerena walked to her, leaned down and grabbed the girl by the throat. “Daddy will be so distraught by your death he will never see me coming. But perhaps there is a better use for you. The daughter of King Neptune is worth a big favor if traded with the right witch or wizard.”

I climbed to my feet, holding my sword in my good hand. “Over my dead body.”

“That can be arranged,” Zerena said with a smile. “But first…” She held Elynna over the edge and released her grip. The girl fell over the edge, her screams filling the air.

I leaped to the edge, shoving Zerena out of my way. Elynna clung to a wood plank that had loosened from the damage. I fell to the deck, grabbing hold of Elynna’s arm just as the wood plank worked loose and fell to the water.

“James!” Elynna cried. “My legs, I don’t know how to use them. I’ll die!”

“I’ve got you,” I said firmly, my gaze never leaving her eyes. “Just hold on.”

“Ah, how sweet,” Zerena teased. “Could it be love?”

I tried to ignore her taunts as I pulled with all my might to hoist up Elynna. My strength was waning and without the use of my other hand, I was nearly useless.

“Perhaps a little incentive?” Zerena said. Suddenly, the clouds overhead turned dark, thunder rolling over the water. Then, the clouds swirled and turned, stretching to the water’s surface. A cyclone waterspout sucked up the water, spitting it everywhere. It glowed green as lightning crashed within it. The ship pulled closer, the wind catching its sails.

“Now you have a choice, Captain. Let her go now, and she is transported to a distant land. It will close the portal and the cyclone will

simply disappear," Zerena explained. "If you continue to hold on, your beloved ship, crew and everything you love will be sucked into the clouds and destroyed."

"You lie!" I hissed, clinging to Elynna. "If it is truly a portal, my ship and crew will be transported along with Elynna."

Zerena laughed. "You talk as though you understand sea magic. This spell is unique to my bloodline alone. Our blood seals it. You could say that your dear little mermaid has the benefit of being my niece."

"Just let go," Elynna begged, staring up at me with unshed tears in her eyes. "You'll die."

"I don't trust her," I said, still struggling to pull her up on deck.

"It doesn't matter if you can trust her or not," Elynna cried, salty tears running down her cheeks. "I won't let others die for me." She released her grip on my arm and began to slide.

"No!" I cried, gripping tighter. "Don't do this!"

"It's the only choice," she whimpered.

She fell loose of my hands, screaming as she fell away from me.

"No!" I cried. I pushed myself to stand and prepared to dive after her, but as my feet left the surface of the ship, I was thrown back by a gust of wind.

"There's no saving your little mermaid now," Zerena mocked. "She's headed for a land of freaky fusions and oddities alike. Where the strangest creatures imaginable fly and little people dance and sing. She'll fit right in! Imagine, a mermaid without a tail!" She cackled.

With her head thrown back, she didn't see Pan wiggle free of his bonds. He zipped through the air and slammed into her, throwing her to the ground. I scrambled across the deck, reaching for her throat.

With only one hand to strangle her with, I gripped her throat. "Bring her back or you die, witch!"

She threw her arms up, sending Pan sailing through the air. She flipped me, straddling me while I lay on the wet deck.

“You’ll never see your darling little mermaid again,” she whispered in my ear.

The gaffing hook I used on the crocodile lay in reach. I grabbed it, slashing upward at her throat. Zerena jerked away from the sharpened metal. The hook, tangling with the chain, caused it to snap loose and wrap around the curved steel.

“No!” she cried, grasping at her chest where her necklace once lay. “What have you done?”

I slammed the globed necklace down on the deck, shattering it. Zerena screamed as the contents scattered.

I lifted my foot, kicking her off me. She skidded across the wood-planked deck. Her body began to seize, her screams filling the air. The sound changed, turning guttural and deep.

She changed shape. She was no longer the beauty I rescued from the net. Her beautiful skin turned a brackish wet-coal color. Her long hair morphed into inky tentacles, slithering across her shoulders and down her back. Her pristine teeth were replaced with menacing sharp fangs.

Her screams continued to cut through the air, she clawed at her flesh, her black eyes rolling back in her head.

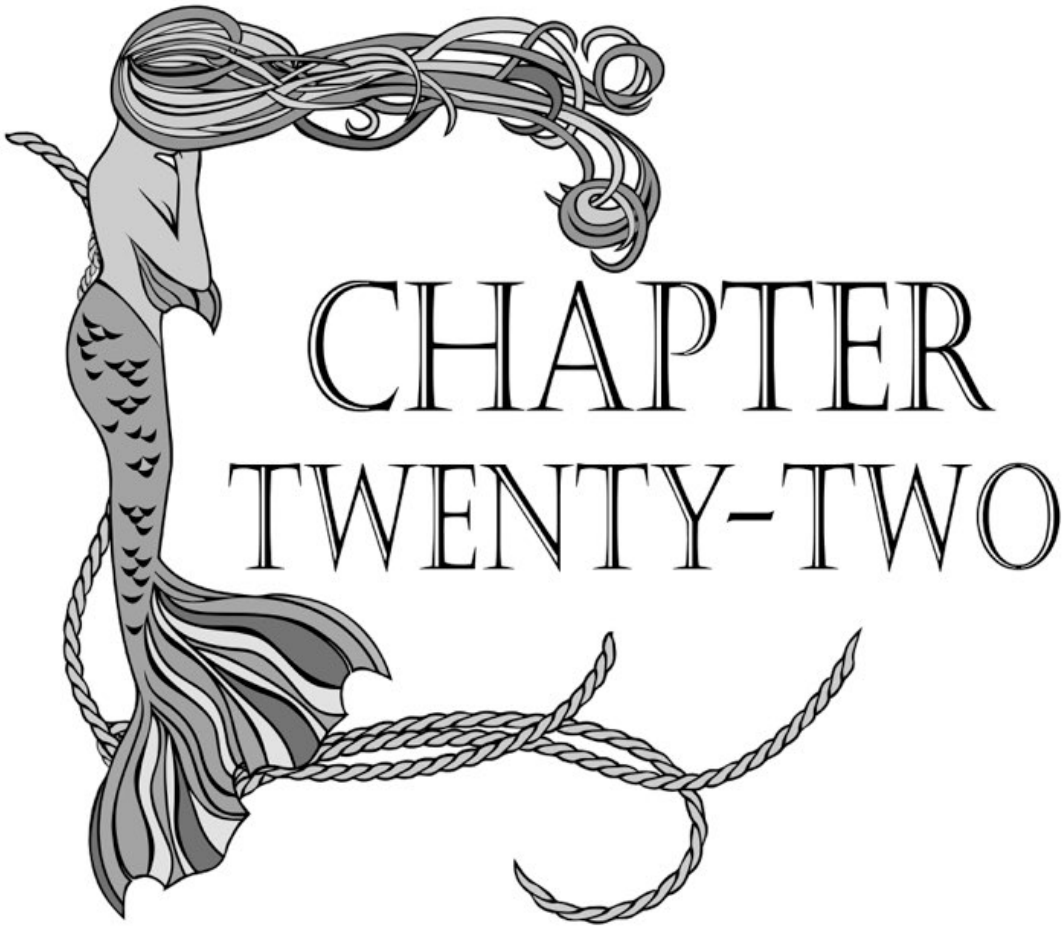
Still holding the hook, I began cutting ropes and rigging that held my crew captive.

“Do you think it’s that easy to escape me, James?” Zerena said, catching her breath.

I turned, looking at her. She was lying on the deck, her legs having turned back into a black-scaled tail. The snakes of her hair hissed and struck, even at her own face, leaving tiny bite marks.

“What manner of sorcery is this?” Mr. Smee murmured from the mass of men he was tied to.

“A dark, evil kind,” said a deep voice from the water.



ZERENA TURNED QUICKLY IN THE DIRECTION OF THE VOICE. A MUSCULAR merman rose from the water on a wave, landing on a pair of feet on the deck. He held a gold staff taller than himself that appeared to be the long horn of a sea unicorn.

He was older. His hair turning white, however it held some light auburn tones like Elynna's. His eyes were a striking blue, sharp and cunning as he studied Zerena.

"Captain," Smee whispered. "Is that…?"

I nodded. "King Neptune."

"Sister," Neptune said gruffly. "You've forced my hand for the last time."

She faked a smile; her sharpened teeth formed more of a sneer. “Brother, as I live and breathe.”

“Zerena, the merfolk of Atlantis wanted your head after your last act of treason,” the king said. “Instead, I banished you to spare your life, to spare my sister.” Sadness shown in his eyes.

“How can I ever thank you?” she mocked. “Big brother to the rescue as always. I’m sure you thought the spelled net was for my own good.”

“Yes,” he scolded, slamming the butt of his staff down on the deck. “The net was a much better option than the executioner. Instead, you enlist the help of some brainless pirate and have him take my daughter!”

I swallowed hard, realizing the pirate he was referring to was me. He knew I had plotted to, and succeeded in, kidnapping Elynna. I worried the only reason I was still alive was his need to deal with Zerena.

“Atlantis should be mine,” Zerena hissed. Her tentacle-filled hair flicked and whipped around her face, agitated.

Neptune shook his head. “Atlantis will never be yours. Your lust for power has blinded you to what really matters, sister. We were charged with protecting the merfolk with love and compassion, not ruling them with fear and brutality.”

“Yes, but cruelty can be much stronger than your love and compassion. Love is weakness for those who hold the crown,” she spat. “For example, have you forgotten that I have your daughter?”

“If you hurt one scale on her, I will take your head myself!” Neptune boomed.

“Temper, temper,” she goaded, whipping her black tail in his direction. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that love and compassion don’t translate to me.”

“Where is she?” Neptune demanded.

“Tucked away in a little corner to pull out whenever I need her,” Zerena teased. “Give me the staff of Atlantis and I will tell you where she

is.”

I could see the contemplation in Neptune’s eyes. The heartbeat of a moment when he considered giving up all of Atlantis to have his daughter back in his arms.

“She sent her through a portal!” I yelled.

Zerena threw out her hand, sending a rope to wrap around my throat and mouth. The threads of rough rope tore into my flesh as it tightened around me like a snake. I struggled to breathe as it cut deeper, crushing my windpipe.

“Enough!” Neptune commanded. He raised the horned staff and the rope disappeared.

I fell back on the deck, coughing and gasping for breath. I was stunned. I thought by destroying the necklace, her power would be lost. Apparently, not all her magic was contained in the necklace.

“Where did you send her?” Neptune yelled.

“You’ll never find her as long as you deny me what is mine,” Zerena hissed. “Give me Atlantis or you’ll never see your little mermaid again!”

“You will never have Atlantis,” Neptune said, trying to keep his composure. “I must protect the people from the likes of you.”

“Then I hope you made your peace with the girl when you had the chance,” Zerena taunted.

Neptune raised his staff; it glowed gold as he pointed it at her.

“Kill me and you’ll never find her,” Zerena growled.

“That’s a sacrifice I will have to make,” Neptune said.

The staff erupted with power as it shot out a beam of white light. Zerena threw up her hands, casting a shield of magic, deflecting the blow.

She laughed. “I will have to tell your little daughter how you were willing to martyr her for your crown. I’m sure she will be so proud!”

“Enough!” Neptune boomed, sending another shot of power toward her. As before, she easily deflected the magic, sending it slamming into

the water below.

I couldn't understand how Zerena was still using her power. It was known that only fairies had natural power. Every witch or sorcerer required a focus to channel their power. Neptune had his staff, but Zerena's necklace was destroyed. *How can she still be using her magic?* I wondered.

"I have had my fill of these petty games, big brother," the sea witch goaded, raising her hands into the air. She swirled the air with her long fingers, calling up a spell. It was then that I noticed a glint of silver. A ring. Unremarkable in appearance, simple, really. I never paid it any attention, thinking it a trinket in comparison to her necklace. But then I realized it was the perfect focus.

The air above her began to swirl and spin, creating strong gales that made even the king waver on his feet. He attempted to bring her down with his staff, but the tempests were too much.

"I believe a family reunion is in order. If you wish to see your precious Elynna, you will have to visit our little sister, Hester," Zerena cried.

Neptune's face went ashen, eyes wide with fear.

A little sister? I thought. *How many members of this accursed family are there?*

I struggled to keep my footing as the maelstrom slammed against my ship. Debris flew through the air, creating even more as it slammed into the barrels and rigging. I turned, taking the gaffing hook and cutting my men free of their restraints. *We have to get off the ship*, I thought.

"Captain, look out!" Smee cried, grabbing me and slamming me to the deck as a barrel flew our way.

I looked up at Zerena, her eyes aflame with anger and hate as she stared at Neptune. "See you in Oz, big brother!" With that, she rose into the air, surrounded by the swirling wind, and was pulled up into the clouds.

The wind died down and all went still. For a few moments, we sat quietly, attempting to take in the situation.

“Captain, is she gone?” Mr. Bones whispered.

“Aye,” I murmured. “I believe she is… for now.”

Neptune turned at the sound of my voice, his stare hard and calculated. “You!” He pointed the staff at me. It didn’t glow, and I sincerely hoped it to be a good sign.

“Yes, your Majesty,” I said, bowing my head. “I humbly beg your forgiveness and ask that you allow me to help locate Elyn—”

His large fist connecting with my jaw actually hurt less than landing on the pile of broken barrels tangled in spare rigging. My vision went fuzzy for a moment, giving way to bright stars against a blanket of darkness.

I sat up on my elbow and shook my head, trying to right myself. When I could finally see again, I peered up to see King Neptune standing over me. His expression was filled with rage. I dared not speak. Neptune extended his hand to me. Hesitantly, I took it and he jerked me to my feet.

“You helped Zerena take my daughter,” Neptune growled. “You fool! None of this would have happened if you would have stayed away from Elynna!”

“Yes. I’m sorry. But I—”

“Silence!”

I closed my mouth and averted my eyes.

“You kidnapped her. You took her from the safety of the lagoon and held her captive aboard your ship,” Neptune said through clenched teeth.

I felt the heat of his anger radiate over me as he stared me down.

“However.” He sighed. This word caught my attention. I looked up into his steel-blue eyes. “It has been brought to my attention that you not only freed her, but you tried to warn and protect her before Zerena took her,” the king continued. “You allied yourself with Pan, whom all in Neverland

know you despise. You risked your life to save her and were willing to die for her."

I held my breath, not wanting to move or make a sound.

"And it appears the two of you shared… a moment."

My brow furrowed in confusion. "Your Majesty, I swear to you that I treated her with the utmost respect. I would never—"

"She told me of the kiss," Neptune murmured.

"But how?" I asked. "When I went to warn her, she couldn't remember anything. She didn't remember Zerena's betrayal, let alone the kiss. The witch had wiped her mem—"

"It was me. I took those memories," the king said.

"Why would you do that?" I barked, forgetting myself and confronting him. "She needed to know of Zerena's treachery to protect herself!"

"I thought I could control my sister," Neptune confessed. "I always have, and I thought sharing a kiss of true love with a dirty pirate was much more dangerous."

"Wait a minute!" cried Pan, zipping through the air. He had remained so quiet during the whole ordeal I had almost forgotten he was there. "There is no way Elynna could have shared a kiss with him. That's disgusting!"

"Quiet, boy," Neptune hissed. "Don't think I haven't noticed your part in all this. Your constant need to play at war has caused more harm than good."

Pan looked like a toddler being chastised by his father. He pouted, crossing his arms over his chest, not daring to talk back to the king.

"Then what of Elynna? We must go after her," I said.

Neptune's face changed. He no longer appeared hard and unmoving, instead he seemed to crumble. He looked like a father desperate to find his child. "I can't." Just two words, but they were so moving, so strong, I felt my heart quake.

“What do you mean you can’t?” I asked. “You must go to her at once and retrieve her before it’s too late!”

“No,” Neptune said, shaking his head. “Where my daughter has been sent, I cannot follow.”

“But you’re the great Neptune. King of the sea,” I said. “You know Zerena’s gone to Oz. Surely you can do something.”

“There are some evils that even I am not strong enough to conquer. My power comes from the sea,” he said mournfully. “I fear my daughter is lost to me.” He turned and began walking away.

I furrowed my brow. “That’s it? You’re just going to count her as lost and go about your life? She is out there somewhere.”

“I cannot follow her, boy,” Neptune spat, turning on me. “If I could, do you think I would leave her? Of course I want my daughter back!”

“Then I’ll find her!” I yelled.

“You.” He huffed a dry laugh. “A one-handed pirate is going to save my daughter from one of the most evil witches of our time?”

“Evil witch?” Mr. Smee whispered. “Um, Captain, perhaps we should consider w—”

“Yes,” I said to Neptune, as though Smee had not spoken. “I will go to this land, and I will bring her back. I don’t fear any witch. Give me a name and a sword.”

“You’ll need more than that,” Neptune said grimly. He looked down at the injured arm I cradled to my chest. “I cannot restore what has been taken from you, but I can help if you’ll allow me.”

I nodded, unsure of what to expect.

Neptune took his staff and placed the tip to my arm. It glowed golden in the setting sunlight. I felt a shock of warmth spread up my arm and into my chest. The power was so strong I fell to my knees before the king.

I screamed out as the bones snapped and my flesh burned like molten metal. As quickly as it had begun, the pain ceased, leaving a slight warm

ache in its wake.

“Captain!” Mr. Smee yelped, running to my side.

“I’m fine,” I murmured, waving him away.

I struggled to my feet and looked down at my arm. My hand was still missing, having been eaten by the dreaded crocodile, but where it once was, the shining silver gaffing hook sat in its place.

“A hook?” I growled.

“Yes,” Neptune replied. “Where you’re going, you will need all the help you can get. It will give you an advantage where you once had a weakness.”

I gazed at the hook in bewilderment. I could see my reflection in its smooth, curved surface.

I looked up at the king. “What can you tell me about this land Elynna’s been sent to?”

Neptune looked at my crew. They gaped at him as each word about the witch struck more fear in their hearts. “Perhaps we should discuss this in private.”

“Mr. Smee, make the ship ready!” I called. “Set the men to work clearing this rigging and debris. Mr. Bones, make right the sail! Stitch her up as best you can until we can make port.”

The men scrambled about on deck, trying to eavesdrop without being noticed.

“Let’s take this to my quarters, if you please,” I said to the king, extending my hooked arm to show the way.

Neptune and I walked for my chambers when Pan swooped down in front of us. “I’m coming too! I want to save Elynna.”

I ground my teeth. “It’s because of you I possess this hook, boy! You best stay out of my way.”

“Elynna’s my friend! She—”

“Mr. Smee!” I called.

“Aye, Captain?”

“Make sure Pan and his Lost Boys busy themselves with work,” I said with a sneer. “They’ll make themselves useful or find another vessel to sail on.”

Pan knew he couldn’t get his boys to land without the ship. I knew he would be forced to play nice until we made port.

Again, I motioned for King Neptune to follow me to my quarters.

Once inside, I closed the door behind us. “This is about your sister Hester, isn’t it? The one Zerena spoke of. You fear her?”

Neptune looked ashamed. “She’s the youngest of my siblings, but the most powerful still. My magic can barely defend against her. There would be no way for me to overtake her.”

“She’s a mermaid too?”

“No,” he said, looking at the sky. “My family was born of the heavens, the children of the gods some would say. In reality, we were created to do the bidding of the gods; great sorcerers with the heavy burden to care for the people and creatures of the world. I chose to rule over Atlantis and see to the well-being of all sea creatures. Zerena, too, chose to become merfolk and vowed to protect the waters and all that lives within them.”

Taken aback, I asked, “How many of you are there?”

“It’s best you don’t know,” Neptune said, turning his gaze to me. “Just know that Hester, the witch who rules over Oz, is the most powerful of us.”

“Is there nothing that can best the witch?” I growled.

“There is one…” Neptune murmured. “It is said that a young girl was to be the saving grace of Oz. She was the daughter of a witch and my brother, Pastoria. He ruled over Oz before Hester killed him and took it for her own. They say she placed a supposed wizard as the keeper of the land, a puppet. It is her who truly rules Oz.”

“Hester killed her own brother?” I laughed drily. “And you stood back and did nothing?”

“My magic is limited to the sea,” Neptune said. “Even Zerena is limited to the water. Once away from the ocean for a short time, we lose our ability to channel our magic. But Hester, she is a witch of the air. As long as a breeze blows, she can gather all the magic she needs.”

“And this daughter, what happened to her?” I asked.

“She disappeared as an infant. Many thought Hester had killed her along with Pastoria,” the king explained. “However, it’s believed the girl was stowed away, perhaps even taken by Hester herself. If a child that powerful were to be harnessed and trained in the ways of dark magic…”

The silence that fell over the room was deafening, the tension of the situation rising like a hot, thick fog.

“And the girl’s mother? You said she was a witch as well,” I asked. “Was she killed?”

“No, she survived. She remains in Oz, battling Hester and her minions.” Neptune sighed.

“So it’s just the simple task of getting to Oz undetected, battling two wicked witches—all while making sure Elynna is brought back unharmed,” I said sarcastically. “Not to mention my crew and myself.”

Neptune studied me. “Don’t be mistaken, I still have no love of pirates. This changes nothing.”

“Everything has changed,” I countered. “You said it yourself. Elynna and I shared a… what did you call it? Moment? A kiss of true love is one of the deepest magics ever heard of.”

Neptune clenched his teeth, his steel-blue eyes cutting through me.

“When I find Elynna—”

“If,” Neptune interrupted.

“*When* I find her, will you give her memories back?” I asked. “And if she wishes to see me… to… to be with …” The words caught in my throat.

Neptune studied me with sharp eyes. “If you can bring my daughter back and she wishes to be with you, I will not stand in her way. But do not stand to hope, for even if you can retrieve her, she may not be the same.”

I let loose a breath I didn’t know I held. Before I could speak another word, someone pounded on the door.

“Aye!” I called.

“Apologies, Captain,” Mr. Smee whimpered. “We’re going to have to come into a port soon if you want the ship repaired. She sustained too much damage.”

I sighed. “We need to leave without delay. Do what you can.”

Smee swallowed hard. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

Neptune and I followed Smee out the open door. The deck was still littered with debris; the crew scrambled to bring some order to the chaos.

“It will take weeks to repair this mess.” I groaned.

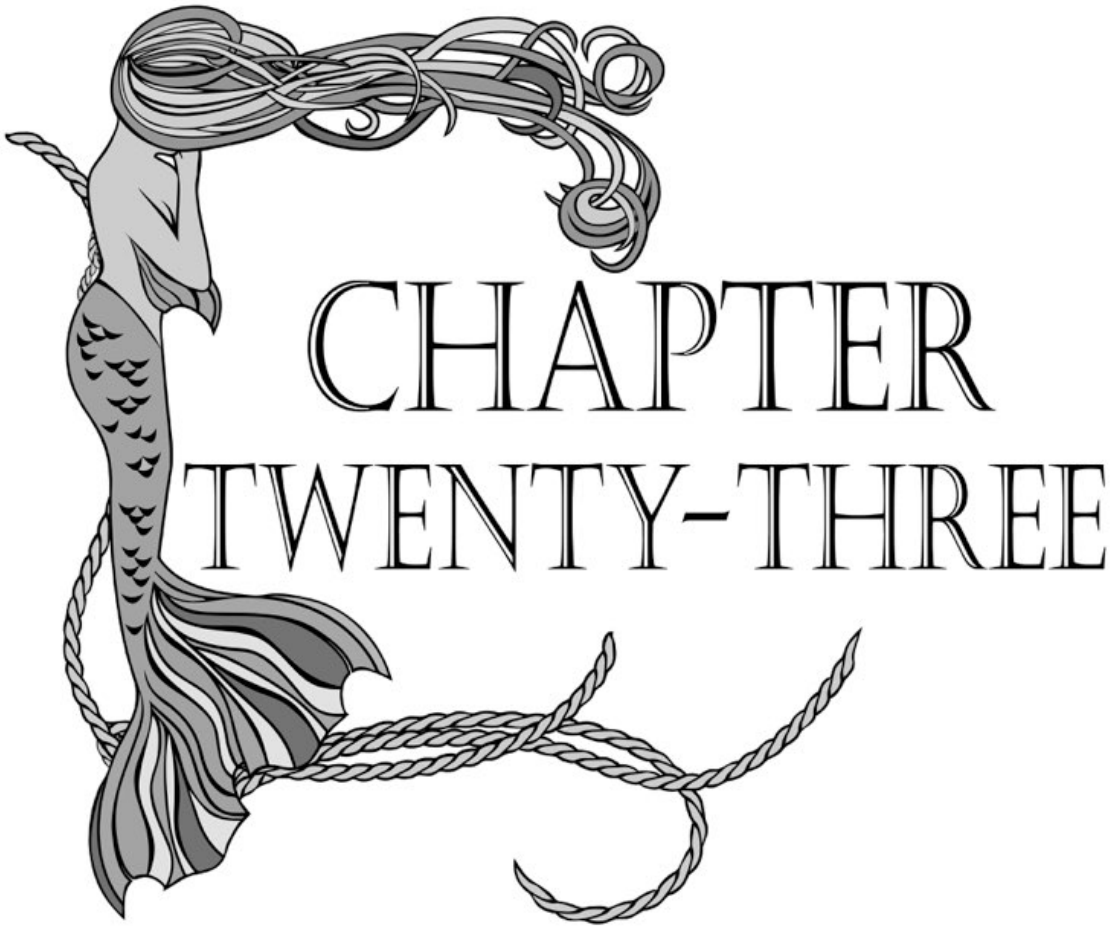
Neptune walked to the edge of the deck where the rail had been broken. With a raise of his staff, the splintered wood came together. The crew stopped and watched as splintered wood and tattered sail mended before their eyes.

Neptune gave a weak smile. “Like you said, you need to leave without delay.”

I nodded, thankful to have my beloved ship whole again.

The king placed a foot on the rail, preparing to jump into the sea. He turned to me, sorrow in his eyes. “Seek out the strongest magic you can find to help assist you, for you will need it.”

With that, he jumped from the deck and slipped beneath the waves.



It was a quiet, solemn sail back to the Neverland port. Except for manning the rigging, the crew and Lost Boys spoke not a word, even to each other. Pan kept his distance, flying high above us.

As I guided the ship into the dock, Tinker Bell tried to engage me in conversation, but I wasn't in a mood to be trifled with.

"You must know that Peter didn't mean to hurt you," she pleaded. "It was an accident."

I kept my jaw clenched, swallowing down the words that so desperately wanted to assault the fairy and young boy.

Instead, I barked commands to my crew. "Lower the gangplank! Take an inventory of weapons and supplies! Head inland to purchase what we need. I want this ship ready to sail immediately!"

I descended the stairs to the deck, kicking a knocked-over pail from my path. “Mr. Smee, set the men to work cleaning up this mess.”

“Aye, Captain,” Smee called nervously.

Tinker Bell flitted around my head, stopping in front of my face. “He feels terrible, truly.”

“Leave me be,” I hissed, waving my hand about my face to shoo her away.

“Mr. Bones, get these Lost Boys off my ship,” I commanded. “They have outstayed their welcome.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Bones said. “Come along, boys,” he said kindly, ushering them across the gangplank onto the dock.

Again, Tinker Bell assaulted me with her fluttering about. “Peter would tell you himself, but I think he’s embarrassed th—”

“Embarrassed?” I barked, my gazed fixed on the tiny fairy. “He’s embarrassed he cut off my hand? I could have been killed! Elynna could have been killed!”

My voice carried over the entire ship, grabbing the attention of everyone aboard. Upon hearing me yell, Pan flew over, landing in front of me.

“Captain, I’m…” Pan shuffled his feet, staring at the deck. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

“Don’t!” I shouted. Pan jerked at the harshness of my tone. “Just don’t. You took away my son. You took away my hand. And, because of your pigheadedness, you are solely responsible for Elynna being taken. You are the bane of my existence, Peter Pan!”

“Please, Captain Shaw,” Tinker Bell pleaded. “You don’t mean that!”

“It’s Hook now,” I hissed, raising my arm for the whole crew to see. “Captain Hook! And anyone saying otherwise will meet their death!”

The rage boiled within me, as though my skin were on fire and molten lava begged to burst free. I swung my hook toward Pan, cutting a large

gash in his arm. “Let that be a warning, Pan. The next time my hook meets your flesh, it will be the last time you draw breath.”

“Captain!” Tinker Bell yelped, rushing to inspect Pan’s wound.

The boy held his arm, blood slowly seeping around his fingers. Tears formed in his eyes. I wasn’t sure if they were tears of anger, pain or sadness. He floated into the air, Tinker Bell at his side. “It’s because you’re a filthy pirate that those things happened. The only one to blame is yourself!”

Tears burst forth from the boy’s eyes. Then he and his fairy zipped through the air, heading inland toward the forest.

I no longer felt guilt for my anger, nor for my desire to kill Pan. *If it’s the last thing I do,* I thought. *I will take Pan’s life.*

I WAITED in my cabin while my crew purchased supplies and made the ship ready to leave Neverland.

Sitting at my worn, wood desk, I pulled out a jug of rum and drank straight from the bottle. The liquid burned like fire, but I continued to drink. I wanted to drown the memory of Elynna falling away from me into that green waterspout. I wanted to erase the feeling of Pan cutting off my hand.

I tilted the bottle for another swig but stopped myself. *No,* I thought. *I need to keep my wits. Elynna is still out there and I have to find her.* I put the stopper in the bottle and placed it back in the drawer.

“Captain Sh… Hook, Captain Hook, sir?” Smee said in a timid voice.

“What is it, Smee?”

“The men are back with supplies, sir,” he said. “I know you’re eager to shove off. Do you have a heading?”

“Neptune said I would need the strongest magic in the land to find Elynna,” I mumbled.

“Sir?” Mr. Smee asked, chancing to take a couple steps closer to the desk.

“There is only one place I can think of that possesses strong magic,” I said, looking to the lantern that had once housed Tinker Bell.

I jumped to my feet and passed Smee as I pushed through the door. I took the stairs up to the helm two at a time.

“Captain Hook, sir?” Mr. Smee called, following me.

“Make ready the ship, Mr. Smee,” I said. I raised my voice so all aboard could hear. “Prepare to sail! We make for the Fairy Forest.”

“The Fairy Forest? Again?” Smee questioned through heaving breaths, having finally caught up with me.

“Aye,” I said. “We are going to need magic on our side if we are going to get Elynna back.”

“But sir, the fairies aren’t exactly fans of ours. Especially after the Tinker Bell ordeal.”

“Do you know of any other place that holds great amounts of magic?” I spat.

“No, sir,” Smee said, averting his eyes.

I placed a hand on his shoulder, leaning down to catch his gaze. “I need you on this, Smee. Without magic, we will never be able to save Elynna. I know it’s not exactly the adventure you boys were hoping for, but think of it—you’ll be saving the daughter of King Neptune! The king of the sea! Who doesn’t want the king of the sea owing them a favor or two?”

Mr. Smee smiled childishly at the thought. “I guess you’re right.”

“Good man, Smee,” I said, patting him on the shoulder.

“All right, you heard the captain,” Mr. Smee called out. “Make the ship ready to sail!”

I watched the men scurry about, hoisting the mainsail and securing the rigging. I knew it was wrong to ask them to risk their lives for my own gain. *Many of the men could very well die,* I thought. *But I have to save Elynna. She's all that matters now.*

As we set sail toward the warmth of the setting sun, I felt a darkness tarnish my soul. I was no longer the man I once was. I pushed the guilt of my deeds away, not caring who I hurt or what I destroyed.

So, let this be a warning to all. If you see a ship sailing under the colors of a black flag, give it a wide berth. For I will strike down all who get in the way. My name is Captain James Hook, and I will get Elynna back at any cost.

Enjoy this sneak peek of book two!

The Untold Stories

RED'S TANGLED TALE

BY

SUZANNA LYNN

I'M NOT THE SILLY, NAÏVE LITTLE GIRL THE STORYBOOKS DESCRIBE ME TO be. I neither wander the woods aimlessly nor carry baskets of goodies to a decrepit grandmother, though I do live with my gran. Most know me by

the color of my hooded cape. Little Red Riding Hood they call me. But that is not my name.

My parents named me Rosalee, though Gran calls me Rose. The name Red came when Gran made my hooded cloak. She claims the thread was spelled by a man who could turn straw into gold, though his name escapes me now. It’s believed my hood guards against dark magic.

Whether such things are true, I’ve yet to see. However, I can tell you it set me apart from the rabble of my village.

I had spent my whole young life in the shadow of Blakx Forest, on the outskirts of Ravenmore. The townsfolk would look down their noses at my family while reaching out their hands for the food and furs we provided at market. After Mother and Father died, I took up the family business, and the gossip and hard stares only got worse.

However, that all changed when I discovered an immense stone tower nestled in the heart of the forest. That night events were set into motion that would change my life forever.

Let me tell you my untold story.

Author ***Suzanna Lynn*** is a full-time mom of three beautiful, energetic children and spends her days with them and her husband in a small town nestled in the deep rolling hills of Missouri.

Growing up in the Ozarks, as a child Suzanna spent her days wandering the fields and woods surrounding her home. While most children avoided the dark corners of the woods, she sought them out, imagining them to be filled with fairies, dragons, and all number of creatures.

Having not lost her childhood imagination, Suzanna has written numerous poems, songs, and short stories that won various awards in high school and college.

However, in 2014 she decided to stop wishing she could publish a book and made the dream a reality when she released *The Bed Wife.*

That first novella gave birth to two more books, completing the series. This sense of accomplishment stirred the embers of several other series and stories, all which are currently in the works.

When she's not busy writing or spending time with her family, Suzanna loves to draw and paint, as well as scrapbook. She also has been known to volunteer with her children's school, the local Ladies Auxiliary veterans group, and even the local zoo!

http://www.suzannalynn.com

ALSO BY SUZANNA LYNN

The Bed Wife Chronicles

The Bed Wife

The Heir

The Queen

The Untold Stories

Hook's Little Mermaid

Red's Tangled Tale

Wolf's Beautiful Beast

Snow's Wondrous Land (coming soon)

The Mythical Shorts

Medusa's Curse

Bastet's Gift *(coming soon)*

Stand Alone Books

Queen of His Heart

The Drowning Girl Murders *(coming soon)*

Children's Books

Buddy the Blue Corgi: You Are Special

Buddy the Blue Corgi: Good Things Take Time

Mermaid Tails *(coming soon)*